COBRA

By MARTIN BROWN
and RUSSELL HOLMAN

Victory Book campaign

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COBRA

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A Paramount Picture.

Rudolph Valentino as Count Rodrigo Torriani. *Cobra.*

"THE WRONG SORT OF WOMEN FASCINATE ME AS THIS COBRA DOES THE TIGER."

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MARTIN BROWN
AND
RUSSELL HOLMAN

A NOVELIZATION OF THE
FAMOUS STAGE SUCCESS
BY MARTIN BROWN

Illustrated with scenes from the photoplay
A Ritz-Paramount Picture starring
RUDOLPH VALENTINO

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Made in the United States of America

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COBRA

CHAPTER I

Even for southern Italy, where superlative scenery is as common as wine, the view from the terrace of the Café Del Mare on such a night was enchanting.

In the moonlight the rocky shore line for half a mile or more was almost as clearly defined as by day. A hundred precipitous feet below, the oily waters of the bay gleamed like highly polished glass. The riding lights of a score of sea craft shone palely. Four miles to sea, Capri nestled brightly in the semi-darkness. Only for the intervening hills, the café might have commanded a spectacle of the acres of crowding lighting that was Naples, five miles to the northeastward across a segment of the crescent bay.

Nevertheless the corpulent Italian with the bristling moustachios scowled. He stood in the doorway of the Café Del Mare, with fairyland spread before him, and scowled. His grievance was professional. He was the proprietor of

the café, and his annoyance at the moonlit panorama was due to the fact that it had not brought him more customers and liras.

He turned from his frowning contemplation of the bay and vented his mental displeasure upon the dozen or more Italians chattering around the tables on the terrace. Bah! They would sit there all night and talk and quarrel and laugh, but they bought only once in a great while. There was little money in Italians. They were useful only as local color for the real spenders, the tourists. For some reason the Café Del Mare did not attract many tourists.

At the present moment the establishment sheltered but three, all of them seated inside. It was stuffy and dimly lighted in there. Also a piano, a guitar and a harp were being tortured with execrable results only a few feet from them. But they seemed to prefer the discords to the noise of the natives on the terrace.

Of the three tourists, the hawk-like Englishman and his mouse-like wife had already incurred the displeasure of Signor Palladino, the proprietor. The Englishman, who was in Italy for his health, had complained testily in schoolroom Italian that the salad was indigestible and the wine not at all what he had ordered. There had been words, and hostilities would probably be renewed when the check arrived.

The third tourist, sitting apart by the open window overlooking the bay, was young and apparently an American. He did not, however, drink everything on the card, as Americans in Italy do. He had been sitting there now for nearly an hour, his one bottle of wine consumed. An expression of quiet, well-bred contentment was upon his rather delicate blond features. He was an unobtrusive patron, but not a profitable one.

Seated quite near the American was the remaining male sharing the hospitality of Signor Palladino's red-tiled roof and enduring his "orchestra." He was also young, and strikingly handsome in the dark, polished, bold-eyed manner of the true Italian aristocrat. He could be accused neither of parsimony nor of abstemiousness. Although he had been lounging at his table but ten minutes, already he had drunk two bottles of wine and had ordered a third. The black-eyed little flower-girl, noting his thirst and his good looks, entered from her vain round of the terrace tables and approached him with her wares. He saw in a rapid appraisal how pretty and vivacious she was. His dark eyes narrowed slightly and a smile curled his full lips. He not only bought from her; he pressed her white hand and bestowed upon her her largest gratuity in many weeks.

The proprietor watched this bit of by-play, and his scowl deepened. He knew this young Italian well; he had known his father and his

grandfather before him. As the flower girl, still blushing, hurried past Signor Palladino to think it over in the outer air, the proprietor caught her by the elbow and muttered a guttural reprimand, "Tend to your business."

She smiled pertly and flashed back, "The customers are my business. You tell me always to be nice to them. Besides—he is very good looking."

"And very penniless," sneered Palladino.

"Ah, but his looks—they excuse a lot," the flower miss insisted softly.

"They do not pay bills. And they cause trouble," retorted the proprietor. As she flounced away, he watched the trim back of the half-grown girl. Palladino sighed, heavily, as fat, old men sigh. He had cherished ambitions in the flower-girl's direction for a while. But, alas! *he* was not young and handsome and bold.

"Ah, buona sera, signor," rumbled a voice at the proprietor's elbow. For such a large fellow, Palladino turned quickly. His face assumed for an instant the professional mask of benignant welcome. But he dropped it quickly as he recognized the owner of the voice.

The newcomer was a huge hulk of an Italian well past middle age, though trying hard to conceal the fact. He was much too ostentatiously clad in garments that fairly sobbed for the immediate attention of tailor and laundress. The purple cravat, for instance, though tied

with extreme care, was stabbed with a diamond so immense that it could not possibly be real. The cravat was spotted with grease, and its borders were frayed. The accoster of Signor Palladino carried in his yellow-gloved hand a thick yellow cane, ornately carved and wore a slightly wilted carnation in his button-hole.

"Signor Minardi has doubtless come to pay his reckoning of last evening," suggested the proprietor in Italian and with evident sarcasm.

Victor Minardi coughed, to conceal confusion. He had expected a chilly reception. Last night there had been rather an unpleasant altercation between himself and Signor Palladino. Having returned but yesterday from a two months' business sojourn in Rome, Victor Minardi had assembled a few friends in the evening at the Café Del Mare and officiated at a welcome home reception. At the conclusion, very late, of the festivities he had been quite confused and loud. He had lacked sufficient liras to pay his reckoning. There had been words and threats, but he had escaped with the debt still unsettled.

"Perhaps I will very soon pay you what I owe—and more," offered Minardi. The blinking of his small, weak eyes was intended to be shrewdness.

Palladino shrugged his fat shoulders.

"If Count Rodrigo Torriani is here," Minardi continued, "I will maybe tell you more

quickly than you think. Tell me—is he here?"

The proprietor sniffed at Minardi and said contemptuously, "You expect Count Torriani to pay for you and you do not even know what he looks like?"

"I have not the honor of his acquaintance," said Minardi, "but my daughter Rosa has. And I have with me a specimen of his handwriting that may prove valuable." He drew from his pocket a wrinkled sheet of paper. As Palladino, curiosity at last aroused, reached for it, Minardi held it gently out of his reach. "If there is somewhere we can talk—in private," offered Minardi. He looked around and met with a start the interested face of the little flower-girl, who in her rounds had paused near them. She moved away at once, the suspicious looks of the two men following her.

Palladino plucked at the shiny sleeve of Minardi and they stepped outside in the shadow of the cool stucco wall. In the flickering light of the ornamental lantern near the entrance-way, the former read from the paper.

> Rosa mia:
>
> My car will be waiting outside the Café Del Mare at ten to-morrow night. I can hardly live until I again kiss your sweet lips.
>
> Rodrigo.

Palladino looked significantly at his companion, his natural avarice stirred by the op-

portunity held out to him. "That he should break the heart of my innocent Rosa!—there are things, Palladino, that a father cannot endure. My family, my honor demand satisfaction."

The proprietor recognized the feelings of the outraged father by advising that they be voiced in a lower tone.

"After all, Count Torriani is not the only Rodrigo in Italy," said Palladino. "Your daughter Rosa must know more than one."

"I intercepted this note at noon, when I awoke. A boy brought it when Rosa was in Naples at her work. I questioned her when she returned. She has admitted that Torriani is the man. There are other letters more ardent than this one. See!" And he drew out a packet from his pocket.

Palladino pondered the matter. In his mercenary breast blended the new Fascisti-inspired dislike of the aristocrats with the ingrained contempt of the shopkeeper for his betters. He did not especially loathe young Count Rodrigo Torriani, last scion of a once powerful but now quite penniless family of local aristocrats. Nor did he fear him. He merely debated in his mind whether the gossip regarding the Torriani debts was accurate and whether to join Minardi in his venture was not to blackmail an empty purse. About Rosa's alleged injury and her father's concern over it, Palladino had no illusions. The question was simply whether the letters in Minardi's greasy coat were valuable

enough to merit a risk. On the whole, he decided they were. He drew Minardi closer to him and drew up a plan.

The young Italian inside the Café Del Mare, having partaken of his fourth bottle of wine and glanced at his watch, was preparing to depart when the proprietor, looking very unctuous and important, approached and whispered into his ear, for several minutes. The young man smiled and nodded. The smile approached a sneer as his eyes followed the back of Palladino lumbering over to the side door of the café, which led down steps to the sea-wall, and opening it. Palladino peered back at his patron and indicated that he might use this exit. The young man again nodded. As the flower-girl passed his table he nodded to her too, but differently. The nod told the flower-girl that what she had stolen in to whisper to him five minutes previously was being confirmed. The young man drained his wineglass. Drama lurked in the offing. He was thoroughly enjoying himself.

What happened next promised at first to add to his rather sardonic sense of humor. The young American, having paid his bill, arose, took up his hat and prepared to depart. Since the newly-opened side door was handy and framed an alluring view of the moonlit bay, the American went through it and down the steps toward the sea wall. At once the young Italian, for whom the door had been opened,

arose and slipped over to the shadows just inside the exit. He did not have to wait long. Almost at once came heavy scurrying footsteps outside. A deep voice roared in Italian, "So, Count Torriani, we meet at last!" Minardi had leaped from his ambush.

Warned by the proprietor that the trap was set and to seize the admirer of Rosa as he sought escape through the side door, Minardi accosted the American with the exuberance of a shaggy great St. Bernard dog leaping at a burglar.

"There is some mistake," protested the American quietly in Italian. He was not nearly as excited as his accuser.

"No, no," cried Minardi, whipping himself into a fine frenzy. "I have sought you all day. About my Rosa. You have mistreated her. It is a serious thing." He laid hold of the coat lapels of the American, at the same time wondering why the fellow did not bid him be quiet and come along to talk business in private. Palladino, lurking further along in the shadow and quite aware a mistake was being made, deemed silence the better course for himself. Let Minardi suffer for his error, the stupid cabbage.

"I know nothing of your Rosa. You have the wrong man," said the American, and he tried to pass his tormentor.

"Bah! You cannot fool me. I am Rosa's papa. Look!" Minardi whipped the letters

from his pocket and waved them in the air. He turned and waved them in the faces of the dozen or more of his countrymen who, attracted by the noise, had at once deserted their tables and wine and were clustering about him.

"This man has injured my daughter, my family! He must pay. Is it not right?" cried Minardi, inspired by his audience. They muttered. They regarded the American with sullen suspicion and rising anger. They had no interest either in Minardi or his daughter. But they were of a low order of city-bred Italians who are always spoiling for a row and are on the side of the contestant with the louder voice.

To the young aristocrat, viewing and hearing the controversy from the shelter of Signor Palladino's side door, it seemed that at this point the comedy had proceeded far enough. It had ceased to appeal to him. So he stepped out and down the stone steps and ranged himself beside the American, who had turned a little white in the face of the rising menace but was otherwise composed.

"Can I be of assistance?" asked the Italian.

The American welcomed the unlooked-for offer. He pointed to Minardi. "This man is accusing me of something I know nothing about. He evidently thinks I am someone else. I can't seem to make him see his mistake." At the same time he handed his card to his would-be rescuer.

The card read: "John Dorning, Dorning and Son, Antiques, New York."

The young Italian flicked the card with a flourish. His lean jaw squared and he turned on Minardi. "You have made a grave error," he said rapidly in Italian. "This gentleman is an American. He is not the person you seek at all." And as Minardi broke into a shrill protest, he interrupted, "Stop! Do you want to be arrested? Do you wish the American Consul to prosecute you? Fool! Go! And tell your friends to go also."

He turned swiftly to the American and said in low-voiced English, "And we had better go too. These people are stupid and quarrelsome. Come along. My car is the other side of the inn."

He turned his back upon the crowd and forged away rapidly, the American following. They broke through bushes and the scent of disturbed flowers assailed their nostrils. They dodged through shadows. At length they came out where a low-hanging Isotta roadster was drawn up just out of the road. Behind them sounded pursuing voices and the crackling of bushes. Some one hurled a stick that landed in a flower bed short of them. They could distinguish Minardi's voice booming futilely amid the din.

The young Italian turned his head back toward them and laughed derisively into the moonlight as he pressed his foot upon the

starter of his car. With a roar and the sudden pungent odor of petrol, the Isotta leaped forth like a leopard springing at a bullock.

A half mile of silent and hard driving, along the shore road, and the car was whipped abruptly to the left into a rough dirt highway and started climbing. The driver slowed down, due to rocks and ruts, furnishing an opportunity for conversation.

"I neglected to introduce myself," he smiled. "I am Rodrigo Torriani, the admirer of Rosa."

John Dorning jolted about in sober silence.

"That, of course, put me under obligation to rescue you when the fool Minardi mixed us up," explained Count Rodrigo gayly. "Now I am taking you to my home—for a drink, at least, if you will honor me."

"It is I who am honored," said Dorning without enthusiasm. He did not wish to offend his rescuer. But he would have preferred now to have banished this whole unpleasant episode from his mind by being taken at once back to his hotel in Naples. He had had himself driven out along the shore in an open carriage from his stuffy hotel for the sake of the view and the air. The carriage and its patient driver were even now waiting for him at the café. Dorning had sat at the Café Del Mare for half an hour absorbing a bottle of wine and the glories of the moonlit bay. Then had come this tumultuous destruction of his solitude, followed by the jouncing escape beside this handsome young

Italian of about his own age, which was twenty-five. Dorning fancied neither the man nor his gayety.

"Ah—we arrive!" sang out Count Rodrigo suddenly and celebrated the fact by swinging so sharply in through the iron gates that Dorning was almost flung from the seat. They glided around a circular drive and stopped in front of a typical stucco Renaissance palace looming massively in the half-darkness and even in the bad light showing the need of repair.

The Italian led the way through the great grilled door and into the stone-paved entrance hall with its high ceilings and elaborately frescoed walls. John Dorning's interest was aroused at once. Whatever the Count Torriani was, his residence showed almost immediate prospects to the entering visitor of being a treasure house of Italian art and sculpture.

Count Rodrigo clapped his hands. "Maria! Maria!" he called. And to Dorning, "Please sit down." He glanced at his guest, who was wholly occupied in surveying the shadowy Renaissance angels and saints on the wall opposite. "You are interested in murals?—but, of course, Dorning and Son. I remember the shop on Fifth Avenue. I was in New York last summer. I shall be glad to show you around this place. I have some originals that are considered very good."

He clapped his hands again. "Maria!" he

called. Maria appeared. She was past middle age and fat and sleepy. She panted in anxiously and nodded vigorously as Rodrigo ordered wine. She panted in again soon, a scrolled solid silver tray with wine bottles and glasses in her hand, and set it down before the two men. They drank solemnly to the destruction of Minardi.

John Dorning was almost immediately glad that he had come. Amid these splendors of a bygone day he was at home. Peace and contentment, aided by the wine, crept over him. The sixteenth century chair upon which he sat, the intricately carved table which held his wine-glass, the frescoed walls, the painted ceilings—these were part of his world, the world he loved.

Young Count Rodrigo sensed what sort of man his guest was at once, and was pleased. For there was in the young Italian, among other qualities less desirable, a strain of appreciation of the beautiful. He was proud of the masterpieces of art which his run-down palace sheltered. He abandoned abruptly his description, over the second glass of wine, of how Minardi's mistake had come about and switched the conversation to the Renaissance and what it owed to the famous Giotto, a rare specimen of whose work hung before them.

John Dorning warmed up at once. In half an hour he found himself liking his host and rendering silent tribute to the man's intimate

knowledge of the whole range of Italian painting and sculpture. The flippancy had gone out of Torriani's manner. The two men argued, agreed, split, and drank more wine. Maria, waddling in and out with refreshments, wondered if she would ever again get to her bed. Dorning suggested that one trouble with the Renaissance painters was that they laid too little emphasis upon technical perfection.

"Technical perfection—bah!" cried Torriani, springing up, spilling his wine, striding over to the painting by Giotto. "Look at this, man! Look at it. And try to tell me what knowledge of form and mere technical cleverness have got to do with a genius like Giotto, who *feels*, who spreads the very breath of life upon canvas!" The black eyes flashed. Torriani thumped his chest.

Dorning wondered, in a whimsical turn of thought, how a man like this could also be the "admirer of Rosa."

It was long after midnight when Rodrigo escorted his guest to a bedchamber once occupied by Lorenzo the Magnificent.

CHAPTER II

The morning sun flooded the bedroom of the Torrianis. It glinted off the massive antique furniture, revealing its beauty and the need of an immediate dusting. It invaded the region of shadows and comparative coolness underneath the canopy of the immense four-poster bed.

Though a new day was confronting him, the heir of the Torrianis slept on.

In a larger sense, a new and rather cloudy day had six months previously dawned for young Count Rodrigo Torriani, and he had not awakened to that either. It had brought the loss of his family fortune, debts, Signor Minardi, and an uncertainty as to his future. Rodrigo was vaguely aware of this new metaphorical day. He had opened one eye to it sufficiently to dismiss all his servants save Maria, who had sullenly refused to be dismissed. He had started tentative negotiations to rent the palace that had been occupied by his family for three centuries. But, beyond these gestures, he had continued to pursue the same blithe, unproductive course as before.

Rodrigo was in this respect a great deal like his late father, Angelo Torriani, the handsome,

impulsive gentleman who was responsible largely for the plight in which the young man now found himself. Angelo Torriani too had been known even in the later years of his life as a waster. To be sure, the elder Torriani had once mingled a bit of politics with his pleasures. It was this unusual mixture of interests that had led to Angelo Torriani's marriage.

For, sent upon a diplomatic mission by his government, the Italian sportsman-politican, after twenty years of falling in and out of love without jeopardizing his bachelorhood in the slightest, had suddenly lost his heart utterly to the quiet, pretty and rather puritanical daughter of a minor English title whom he encountered at a social function in London.

Angelo, like his son after him, had always been selfish in his loves. He was a taker rather than a giver. But when he found that his accustomed sweeping and very Latin style of lovemaking was not impressing the sensible Edythe Newbold, he became a suppliant. He made solemn promises to abandon his manner of living and he neglected his political duties. And, having at last carried the citadel of her affections by this method, he found that he must also batter down further defences in the form of a father who thoroughly disliked him. Sir Henry Newbold had amassed his fortune and title in the Indian trade. He distrusted foreigners. He particularly distrusted foreigners

who did not work. To obtain the hand of Edythe in marriage, Angelo Torriani had to discard the habits and prejudices of three centuries of idling Italian ancestors, enter Sir Henry's business, and go to India.

During the second of the sixteen years which Angelo Torriani spent intermittently in Calcutta as resident manager of Newbold and Company, Rodrigo was born to Edythe. In the fifteenth year, Rodrigo was sent to England to school. In the same year, Sir Henry Newbold died, an elder son of the self-made knight succeeding to the management of the business. For a year Angelo Torriani carried on in an environment and trade which he had always hated. When, at the end of that period, Edythe, never in robust health and of the type which cannot become accustomed to the tropics, succumbed to a fever, Angelo resigned his position and left India forever.

Returning, after those many years, to the palace of his fathers at Naples, Angelo was for many weeks too much overcome with a very sincere grief hardly to show himself outside the iron gates. But then the reaction smote him. He became, after a few months, nearly the adventuresome Angelo of old. He visited Florence, Rome, the Riviera. He re-entered politics, tentatively at first, then more boldly. He began to notice again that women were smiling at him and then lowering lashes. He spent freely both money and energy. Still a hand-

some, virile figure at forty-five, he discovered that life, after all, was still good. He struck a rapid pace after a while and maintained it until about six months before Rodrigo Torriani met John Dorning at the Café Del Mare. Angelo Torriani then died quite as suddenly as he had fallen in love with Edythe Newbold. The sixteen years in India, busy but abstemious years, had probably prolonged his life. But the blood of the Torrianis, which killed young, had done for him at last.

Rodrigo was a lively, handsome child with large, snapping black eyes, eyes such as friends of mothers jokingly say auger ill for the girls they encounter when the child grows up. In this case, the prophecy worked out. The boy grew up, energetic, quick-tempered, and very attractive.

At Eton, and, later, at Oxford, whence he had been sent from India at the insistence of his mother, Rodrigo was not Edythe Newbold's son, but Angelo Torriani's. He was naturally more popular with his fellows than with his instructors. The latter did not like it because he apparently never studied. This was particularly irritating to the plodding dons in view of the fact that Rodrigo always passed his examinations with ease. He specialized in subjects which he liked, and he did not like subjects for which he did not possess a natural aptitude that made studying almost superfluous. More-

over, he was quick-witted and he had had an excellent English tutor in India.

Rodrigo spent most of his vacation periods in the London town house of his mother's brother, Sir William Newbold, and the merchant-knight's rather stuffy family. The family consisted of Rodrigo's prim aunt, who did not at all possess her late sister's good looks or tolerance, and two weedy blond daughters. Though the latter were both about his own age and his own experience among the fair sex was at the time limited by his scholastic activities, he yet treated Evelyn and Sylvia Newbold with a blasé condescension which they did not fancy in the least. Neither did his Aunt Helen, who had esteemed Angelo Torriani as quite unworthy of marrying into the Newbolds and was continually urging Sir William to keep a tight leash upon Angelo's son. Rodrigo, thus, during his leisure time from Oxford found constant barriers in the way of his wandering very far in London on pleasure bent.

It was the irony of fate that a social affair given under the circumspect auspices of his uncle should have led to his acquaintance with Sophie Binner.

'Most of the Newbolds' acquaintances were people like themselves—rich, self-satisfied, very respectable, and quite boring. The entertainments given by this set for their very carefully selected guests were for the most part the soul of convention. Bridge for the usual useless

prizes, musicales by visiting celebrities, box parties at the opera. On the evening that Sir William came home from the office and suggested that the Newbolds give a Treasure Hunt, his wife was at first mystified and then scandalized.

The Treasure Hunt was the fad of a rather fast set of London society. It was in the nature of a hare and hounds chase, without the hares. The participants started out from a central spot toward a distant goal, aided at frequent intervals by clews posted upon trees, fences and other places. The first to arrive at the goal was the winner. The hunts were usually accompanied by considerable wining, dining and hilarity of a rather rowdy type.

In answer to his wife's disapproval, Sir William announced that a mutual and very respectable friend of theirs had been describing to him a Treasure Hunt in which the friend had participated and which had quite converted him to the sport.

"We have to give a party next month," Sir William urged in his fussy voice. "I think our set needs a little stirring up. Why shouldn't we have a Treasure Hunt? Many conservative people are going in for them. George Trevor said he was quite charmed. And it is important in a business way that I do something in his honor while he is in London. What do you say?"

After several days of deliberation, Helen

Newbold yielded. The date was set and preparations were started. Rodrigo, who had just come down from Oxford for three weeks, was interested at once. For the first time since he had been familiar with his uncle's family, they they were about to do something that seemed to promise him some pleasure. He even asked permission to invite some of his Oxford friends who were in town to share in the fun, and received the permission after some questioning by his aunt as to the respectability of these added guests. He invited William Terhune, a Rhodes scholar from South Dakota, a raw-boned, husky chap, crew man and born pleasure-seeker, and Leslie Bond, a classmate from London whom Rodrigo admired for his witty tongue and suavity.

The Treasure Hunters were to travel in automobiles and Rodrigo secured the use of his uncle's light sedan, neatly side-stepping the suggestion that his two cousins travel along with Terhune, Bond and himself.

A large crowd of colorless people gathered one June afternoon in the drive of the Newbolds' town house and received a light collation and their instructions for the hunt. The first directions were to take them out to a London suburb, and the cavalcade started sedately enough, most of the sojourners undecided whether or not the Newbolds were attempting something revolutionary and not quite respectable in this new type of entertainment.

Rodrigo and his two friends were in a chaffing, carefree mood. Rodrigo was never a conservative driver and soon had the borrowed car moving at a pace that started the bobbies at the street intersections frowning and waving admonitory hands at him. Having attained the open country and the little tea house, to which their instructions had led them, in advance of the others, the young men did not stop to partake of the refreshments arranged for them by their host, but set off rapidly for the next rendezvous. This they never attained.

For a half mile or so beyond the tea house, they overtook an open runabout containing two very attractive young ladies. The blonde who was driving was particularly pretty in a bold, artificially arranged way. The girl at the wheel glanced back at the rapidly approaching car, flashed a friendly but taunting smile at it, and then stepped upon the accelerator and attempted to pull away from it. Rodrigo and his companions were interested and aroused at once. Rodrigo sped up and the race was on.

The sedan's glittering radiator-cap was almost even with the left rear wheel of the other car. Down a hill the cars swooped. Fifty yards farther on, the car of Rodrigo was exactly abreast of the runabout. Then came a sharp turn to the left, which the cars took together and plunged up the grade leading to the little rustic bridge neck and neck.

And here came catastrophe.

For the turn and the bridge were surprises to both drivers. It was a small wooden bridge spanning a ravine and a narrow stream running swiftly far below. A stout railing stretched along either side of the road, across the bridge. There was room for two carefully driven cars to pass each other. But not room enough for two speed maniacs.

The thunder of the flying cars across the loose planks was broken by a splintering crash. When the dust cleared away, the hood and front wheels of the runabout were disclosed suspended in mid-air over the ravine, the glass of the front lights and wind-shield were no more. Yet the motor of the runabout was still throbbing, and the two girls, though dust-covered and with faces bleeding slightly from tiny bits of glass that had pricked their skin, were unhurt. They discovered this after moving cautiously around a little.

When Rodrigo and his companions drove slowly back to them, offering succor, both girls were smiling, though a little uneasily to be sure, and the girl at the wheel was showing disturbing signs of putting the motor into reverse and seeking to back off the heavy piece of bridge-railing that, jammed in between their rear mud-guard and the side of the car, was the only thing preventing the machine from plunging off into eternity.

"I say, leave the motor alone!" Rodrigo shouted at once and scrambled hurriedly out

from behind the wheel of the sedan, his companions following.

"And whose motor is it, may I ask?" the pretty blonde in the driver's seat came back promptly, at the same time jabbing furiously at levers.

Rodrigo was by this time at her side and, horrified, was clutching for her wrist. "Lady, lady," he cried half in fear and half in mockery. "Shut off the motor and get out quick. You're on the brink of eternity."

"Yes, Sophie, do," the other girl, slightly older and a brunette, agreed.

At first inclined to be stubborn, Sophie at length permitted herself to be helped down from her precarious perch and her companion followed, Terhune and Bond re-inforcing Rodrigo.

Thus the Oxonians made the acquaintance of Sophie Binner and Adele Du Bois, ladies of the chorus in "The Golden Slipper," the current revue at the Gayety. On the promise of stopping at the nearest garage and having the wrecked machine sent for, the girls consented to enter the sedan and be driven back to London. By the time the outskirts of the city were reached, the party was a very gay one and Sir William Newbold's Treasure Hunt was quite forgotten.

Rodrigo was especially interested in Sophie. He had at that time met very few ladies of the stage informally. The frankness, sharp tongue

and cream-and-gold beauty of Sophie intrigued him. Rodrigo was rather adroit with all types of women, even at twenty. He flattered Sophie half seriously, half banteringly, exchanged *bon mots,* made an engagement in a low voice to see her again. Bill Terhune told her on the quiet that Rodrigo was the son of a real Count, thus increasing many fold the force of the impression the good-looking Latin had made upon her.

The Oxonians had dinner with Sophie and Adele, saw the show at the Gayety, and took the girls later to a supper club. It was the first of several parties in which Rodrigo's and Sophie's friends took part.

Having, following this adventure, made his apologies to his uncle and aunt for having left the Treasure Hunt flat, the excuse being the necessity of rescuing an automobile party in distress, Rodrigo proceeded to cultivate the further acquaintance of Miss Binner assiduously and without the knowledge of the Newbolds.

He was her constant cavalier. She taught him much—for instance, that a baby-faced blonde can possess a wicked tongue, a sudden and devastating temper and a compensating tenderness that made up for both defects. He was thoroughly infatuated at first. Then his ardor cooled as he realized that Sophie was professing to take his wooing seriously. The idea of contracting an alliance with a future

nobleman seemed to appeal to her. Rodrigo did not think of her in that regard at all, and he was alarmed. He began looking for a loophole.

The climax came at a party arranged for after the show in Sophie's Mayfair apartment. Rodrigo had recruited Bill Terhune, Bond and three or four other Oxford friends for the fun. They had accumulated Sophie, Adele and a quartet of their sister coryphees at the theatre after the evening performance and whirled them through the London streets in a fleet of taxicabs. At two o'clock in the morning the party was in full swing. The tinpanny piano crashed out American jazz under the nimble fingers of Sophie. Leslie Bond numbered drumming among his numerous avocations and had brought along the clamorous tools of his hobby. His hysterical efforts on drums, cymbals and cowbells augmented the din and broke both drums.

The revelers sang, danced, drank and made love. Bill Terhune, under the impetus of spirits, was especially boisterous.

There was a sharp knocking upon the door. A corpulent, red-faced Englishman in a frayed and gaudy bathrobe announced that he occupied the apartment below, had been awakened by plaster falling upon his bed and his person, and that "this Donnybrook Fair must cease at once." He was set upon joyously by three burly Oxonians and good-naturedly propelled down the stairs.

Sophie, from the piano, however, did not share their enthusiasm. "It may interest you impetuous lads to know that our killjoy friend is a magistrate and will probably have a couple of bobbies here in five minutes," she warned them. They laughed at her and the party went on.

In twenty minutes there was another knock. Two bobbies, each built like Dempsey, confronted Rodrigo when he opened the door. The policemen entered with that soft, authoritative tread that London police have. One of them laid hands upon Bill Terhune. Bill, former intercollegiate boxing champion, was in a flushed and pugnacious mood. He promptly struck the officer in the face and sent him reeling to the floor.

Immediately the party grew serious. Englishmen respect the police. An American may attack a Broadway policeman, but hitting a London bobby is something else again. The other bobby swung into action with his club. There was a concerted rush for the door. Rodrigo could have easily escaped. But he chose instead to stand by Sophie, who, he knew, was due for trouble as the tenant of the apartment. When the tumult and the shouting died, the room contained Sophie, Rodrigo, one angry bobby with pencil raised over his book, and one still bobby recumbent upon the floor.

"The names now—the right ones," commanded the erect bobby.

"First, don't you think we'd better revive your friend on the floor?" Rodrigo suggested.

When they had brought the fallen one back to life, Rodrigo soothingly and skillfully persuaded the officers to let Sophie alone, to allow him to assume sole responsibility for the trouble. He asked only permission to telephone his uncle, Sir William Newbold. The bobbies generously consented to take him, without Sophie, to jail for the rest of the night, but they declined to allow him the use of the telephone.

The jail cell was cold, cramped and dirty. Rodrigo's cellmate was a hairy navvy recovering from a debauch. Rodrigo had to listen to the fellow's alternate snoring and maudlin murmurings until dawn. When, around ten o'clock in the morning, he did succeed in getting in touch with his uncle, the latter's influence was sufficient to secure his release.

Sir William delivered to his nephew a severe lecture. Then he telephoned the newspaper offices with the idea of having any possible news of his nephew's incarceration suppressed. In this endeavor he was unsuccessful. Two papers contained an account of the arrest, and the more sensational sheet of the two declared that Rodrigo, son of Count Angelo Torriani and nephew of "London's leading merchant-knight, Sir William Newbold," was the fiancé of Sophie Binner and that they were to be married

shortly. Rodrigo denied this vehemently to his uncle and was indeed just as angry about it as was Sir William. He saw in it evidence that Sophie had prevaricated to the newspapers, had used his ill fortune as a means of securing notoriety and possibly of binding him publicly to an alliance that did not exist.

He resolved to call upon her and break off any possible entanglement with her.

He confronted her in her apartment in the middle of the next afternoon. She looked especially lovely, her spun-gold tresses in informal disarray and her beauty encased in a silken lounging gown. But Rodrigo was firm. He accused her of exploiting last night's episode in the papers, of giving out news of an engagement that was false. Though she denied this, at first poutingly, then coyly and finally with considerable vehemence not unmixed with vulgarity, Rodrigo insisted. He worked her into a tempest and, at the climax, dramatically walked out of the room and, as he thought, of her life.

During the two years following his graduation from Oxford, Rodrigo had vague ambitions to become a painter and spent considerable time browsing about the galleries of England, Spain, France and his native Italy. He had a workroom fitted up in the palace of the Torrianis and did some original work in oil that was not without merit. But he worked spasmodically. His heart was not in it. He knew

good painting too well to believe that his was an outstanding talent, and he lacked ambition therefore to concentrate upon developing it.

In the pursuit of pleasure and the spending of money he was more whole-hearted. He skied and tobogganed at St. Moritz, gambled at Monte Carlo, laughed at Montmartre's attempts to shock him, and flirted in all three places. Upon the invitation of the bobby-assaulting American Rhodes scholar, Terhune by name, now squandering his South Dakotan father's money in New York under the pretence of making a career in architecture, Rodrigo visited America. America, to Rodrigo, was represented by the Broadway theatre and night-club belt between dusk and dawn. Having in a few weeks exhausted his funds and finding his cabled requests for more greeted with a strange reticence, Rodrigo started for home. Three days out from New York he received the cable announcing to him Count Angelo Torriani's sudden death.

Rodrigo had adored and respected his quiet, high-minded English mother, from whom he had inherited the thin vein of pure gold concealed deep down below the veneer of selfishness and recklessness that coated his character. He loved his father, from whom he drew the superficial and less desirable traits of his personality. Loved him and, without respecting him particularily, treated him as he would an older brother of kindred tastes and faults.

His father's death shook Rodrigo down considerably for a while. It sobered him, made him suddenly aware of his appalling aloneness in a world of many acquaintances but not an understanding relative nor close friend. The secondary calamity of having been, out of a clear sky, left penniless and in debt did not at first impress itself upon him. When the late Count Torriani's will was read, revealing the surprisingly devastated condition of the Torriani finances, and debtors began to present their claims, Rodrigo, now Count Rodrigo faced the realization that his whole mode of life must be changed.

He dismissed the servants, keeping Maria because she refused to go, even after being informed that she would probably have to serve without pay if she stayed. He finally brought himself to talking with an agent at Naples about renting the palace and selling some of the works of art which it contained. The agent was very brisk and business-like. He jumped up and down from his chair and rubbed his hands continually, like an American. Rodrigo was irritated by the vulgarian. He abruptly left the matter and the realtor up in the air and jumped into his car outside. As he swung along the shore of the bay he was in very low spirits, lonesome and as nearly depressed with life as he had ever been. In his preoccupation he paid only subconscious attention to the road ahead and the swift speed at which his car was travel-

ing. He heard suddenly a shriek and flashed his eyes in its direction just in time to avoid killing a girl.

In the flash he saw that the girl was dark, and beautiful in a wildflower-like manner. She was also very dusty from walking. In the torrent of oaths which she poured after him, she furthermore revealed herself as charmingly coarse and unrestrained. Rodrigo cheered up. After the weeks of grief and loneliness, and particularly after the Naples realtor, he found himself wanting ardently to talk to a woman, any woman. He stopped the car and slowly backed up even with the approaching girl. She continued to swear at him. He smiled. When she had gradually quieted, he apologized and offered her a seat beside him. Her angry face relaxed, she pouted, and ended by accepting.

In a few days he had drifted into a fast ripening friendship with Rosa Minardi, who was childlike, was no tax upon his conversational charms or ingenuity, and who liked him very much. Her mother was dead, her father was away in Rome on some mysterious errand. Rodrigo badly needed any sort of companionship, and Rosa filled the need.

CHAPTER III

Maria's gnarled knuckles beat vigorously upon her young master's door. When her tattoo failed to bring results, she opened the door and walked boldly in. Waddling to the floor-length windows, she flung aside the heavy draperies, drenching the room with sunlight. With a guttural exclamation that was half disgust and half tenderness, she turned toward the dark, recumbent form upon the canopied bed, still undisturbed by her activities. She approached Rodrigo and shook him.

When at last he blinked up at her, she said sharply, "Get up, lazy one. Your American has already breakfasted and is downstairs waiting for you."

Rodrigo's face screwed itself interrogatively. American? Then his drowsy, somewhat fuddled brain remembered Dorning, of Dorning and Son. Rodrigo frowned. Bother Americans. So full of restless energy, such early risers. He looked languidly at the watch upon his wrist. Eleven o'clock. He sat upright in bed and indulged in a prodigious yawn. With a grimace at the ample back of Maria, just disappearing out of the door, he slid out of bed.

Half an hour later, having bathed and breakfasted, Count Rodrigo, looking as fresh and bright of eye as a trained athlete, walked briskly downstairs to find that his guest had apparently not missed him in the least. Dorning was standing in front of the expansive canvas of an oil painting in the great entrance hall of the Torrianis. He had just donned a pair of tortoise-rimmed glasses and was bending over to read the metal plate set in the elaborate frame of the painting. The plate read: "Francesca Torriani, 1527-1562." Dorning realized the likeness between the ruffled-collared, sardonically smiling aristocrat on the canvas and his host, whom he now turned to greet.

"I see you are making the acquaintance of my ancestors," said Rodrigo. "This one, like the others, you will observe, led a short life and, so I undertsand, a merry one." Rodrigo noted curiously how glasses added at least five years to the age of John Dorning. Having at the instant of their first encounter at the Café Del Mare set the American down as an innocent and probably a prig, Rodrigo had, during their discourse and drinking of the previous night, changed his mind and conceived a mild liking for the man. Dorning was honest, outspoken, and possessed of considerable culture. He was, Rodrigo vaguely felt, the sort of person whom he should cultivate, the type that develops into a staunch and worth-while friend.

"Your ancestor has at least had the good

fortune to have been perpetuated by an excellent artist," said Dorning.

"Here is something that will interest you," offered Rodrigo, walking over to a low, ornately carved cabinet set against an adjacent wall. "This is the best example of Early Renaissance cabinet work anywhere around here." Dorning bent a grave, interested head and ran expert fingers over the carving. His host tugged at the doors of the cabinet. As he wrenched them apart, a shelf inside, unbalanced by his effort, slid out upon the floor, spilling its contents as it came. The two young men looked at each other, and Rodrigo grinned sheepishly. Two bundles of letters and a feminine lace fan lay at Dorning's feet.

Rodrigo dropped to his knees and, replacing the souvenirs, closed the cabinet. He rose, dusted his hands, said suavely, "The cabinet was made by Beniti, in Genoa, around 1627. The contents are slightly more modern."

"So I judged," said John Dorning dryly. Then with more enthusiasm, "I only wish I knew Italian antiques as well as you do, Count Torriani—and antiques are my business."

Both turned as Maria came toward them in considerable agitation. "A man named Minardi and a girl are here to see you," she announced in rapid Italian to Rodrigo. "I do not like his looks. I refused to admit him, but he has pushed his way into the outer hall."

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

"STOP! DO YOU WANT TO BE ARRESTED? THIS GENTLEMAN IS AN AMERICAN."

She indicated the draperies on the other side of the room.

Rodrigo's face clouded. Damn the fellow's persistence. "Tell him to go away. I will not see him. Tell him I shall have him arrested if he continues to bother me," he instructed Maria.

She turned doubtfully. She lacked her usual faith in her sharp tongue in dealing with a calloused fellow like Minardi. She had taken but a step when the draperies parted and Minardi, wearing the same clothes, expression, and carnation as on the previous evening, bulked before them. He had heard Rodrigo's voice talking with Maria, and he was taking no chances. His fat, weak face was trying its best to assume hard, menacing lines. His ill-kept, corpulent body was drawn up as straight as possible with unrighteous indignation. He relaxed for an instant to turn around and drag by the wrist from the other side of the curtain his daughter, Rosa.

Rosa had been brought to the scene with some difficulty. She flashed indignation at her father through swollen eyes. Actually propelled now into the presence of Rodrigo, she glanced half defiantly, half shamefacedly at him, then stood regarding the floor.

Victor Minardi started at once toward Dorning, taking up again with undiminished vigor the torrent of abuse and threat which he had hurled at the American at the Café Del Mare.

He was persisting in his belief that Dorning was Count Torriani, the man who was to pay.

Rodrigo stepped between the gesticulating Italian and the uncertain Dorning. "I am Count Torriani. Now, what is it you want?"

Minardi wheeled upon Rodrigo. "So—it was you! Ah. Why did you not say so before, eh?" And he launched into a fresh flood of indignation.

Rodrigo raised a hand to stop him. He perceived that this fellow could not be easily overawed. Minardi wanted money and would probably continue to be a howling nuisance until he got it. Rosa, Rodrigo suspected shrewdly, was in the plot with her father. Certainly she would not otherwise have revealed her love affair with Rodrigo to Minardi and, instead of keeping her rendezvous at the Café Del Mare, allowed the noisy old man to come on a blackmailing expedition in her place. Any tenderness Rodrigo had previously felt for Rose Minardi disappeared. His lips curled as he looked at her dark head, cast down in assumed modesty.

When Minardi had calmed down, Rodrigo snapped, "How much do you want?"

Minardi's anger faded. His eyes lighted up with greed. "Five thousand lira," he replied in a business-like tone.

"You come high," said Rodrigo.

Minardi's hand went to his greasy inside coat pocket, "I have here letters that are worth

more than that," he said. "Letters you have written to my Rosa. There are such things as breach of promise suits. The newspapers would like them, eh? The Torrianis are not popular at Naples, eh?"

In spite of himself, Rodrigo winced a little. This fat, futile old reprobate began to assume the proportions of a real danger. Rodrigo essayed frankness. "You know so much about the Torrianis," suggested he, "you perhaps know that I have not five thousand liras at the moment."

Minardi shrugged his stooped shoulders. "Even if that is true, you can get them," he said. And he looked significantly at John Dorning, an interested and somewhat disgusted spectator at the scene.

Rodrigo's slim fingers were drumming nervously upon the Beniti cabinet which he had just been displaying to his guest. In their nervous course over the top of the cabinet the finger points met the smooth surface of an elaborately wrought silver vase standing there. Rodrigo looked down. He hesitated an instant, then caught up the vase in his hand.

"This was made by the great Cellini himself," he remarked to Minardi. "It is worth at least twice the amount you are blackmailing me for. You can easily dispose of it in Naples. I do not, of course, admit any of your silly accusations. However, take this vase—and go at once."

He held the exquisitely formed metal toward Minardi. John Dorning's eyes made a hasty appraisal of it. He half opened his lips to protest against this careless disposal of the little silver masterpiece. But Minardi, hardly looking at it, snarled, "No. I want money."

Dorning said at once to Rodrigo, "Give him money then. I will buy the vase. I'll give you twice what he wants—ten thousand liras—and make a handsome profit if I ever want to dispose of it." He took out his purse.

Rodrigo regarded his guest with puzzled surprise. "I don't want you to do this for me, Dorning. I——"

"Please believe me, it is merely a matter of business," Dorning cut in quietly. "I am in Italy for the purpose of picking up just such bargains." He counted out the money and offered it to Rodrigo. The young Italian hesitated an instant, then took the proffered notes, counted them and started to hand half to Minardi.

"You want something for your money, don't you?" Dorning interjected. "Your letters?"

"Naturally," replied Rodrigo, flushing a little. He was not used to being prompted. As he took the packet of note-paper from Minardi's greasy hands he now made an over-elaborate show of checking them up. "They are all here," he decided, speaking curtly and more to Dorning than to Rosa's papa. To the latter he continued even more curtly, "Now get out. If I

see you about here again I will turn you over to the police."

Minardi bowed impudently. He made a move to seize the silent Rosa's hand, but she eluded him. Suddenly she opened shrill soprano abuse of her father. "I hope you're satisfied now!" she cried. "You have humiliated me, your daughter. You've sold my honest love for money, made me appear a low, scheming woman. I hate you." With a swift movement she slipped over to Rodrigo, who stood with arms folded, regarding her with a wry smile.

"Please tell me you do not think I plotted this with him," she pleaded, her dark, warm face quite near to his. "It is not for money I love you. I did not come to the café last night, because I was angry with you for telling me I am bad tempered. I cried all last night over that, Rodrigo. But I am not angry at you now. I am angry only at Papa." Her soft arms attempted to steal around Rodrigo's neck. "Tell me that you still love me," she begged in a low, husky voice.

Still he stood rigid. He shot an apologetic smile at Dorning. Even now he felt the attraction of this creature of primitive emotions, though he suspected she was acting.

"But you *are* bad tempered, Rosa," he jibed, disengaging her arms. "And I think you are somewhat of a liar besides."

She fairly flung herself away from him at that, standing with heaving bosom and flash-

ing eyes. She was still cursing him when her father laid violent hands upon her and led her out of the house.

Rodrigo shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. "A charming creature," he remarked flippantly to Dorning. Nevertheless Rodrigo was rather ashamed of the scene the two Minardis had made in front of the American. Somehow Dorning had already assumed an importance to him much more than that of a casual and congenial guest. It was not that Dorning had stepped into an embarrassing situation with ten thousand liras. It was the spirit that had prompted the American's action. Rodrigo sensed a quiet strength in the man that he himself somehow lacked, a strength that in the troublous future confronting him he would like to have near him.

"The trouble with women," Rodrigo remarked, "is that they cannot keep love in its proper place. It soon ceases to be a game with them and becomes a mad scramble to possess a man. Then comes jealousy, bad temper, remorse, and complications such as you have just seen."

" 'Love is to man a thing apart; to woman their whole being,' " Dorning quoted. He did not think his host had acquitted himself with especial credit in the "complications." There was a tawdriness about the Minardis and the scene they had created unbecoming to a man who owned original Cellinis and other treas-

ures. Art, to Dorning, was about all there was in life. The Rosas were superficial annoyances that had never yet entered into his own career, though he was quite aware that they existed in the careers of most other men. He had been immediately attracted to his host by their mutual interest in art. The charm of the man, his good looks, his facile tongue, his wit and deftness in conversation had added to the attraction. Why should such a man love such a common creature as Rosa Minardi and consent to be blackmailed by her father? Dorning resolved to forget Rosa and turned the conversation to tapestries.

But Rodrigo's thoughts were not entirely diverted from "complications." "There is an amusing tradition about those tapestries," he said. "You will observe that the ones near the window seat are identical with those at the door leading into the outer hall. Well, my worthy ancestor whose portrait you have praised, Francesca Torriani, once found their similarity his undoing. It seems that he was entertaining a very lovely married lady in this room, a Countess. Her husband, the Count, followed her to the rendezvous. Suddenly in the middle of my ancestor's love-making, the Countess caught sight of her husband outside. 'Quick,' she cried, 'where can I hide?' Francesca thrust her behind the tapestry by the door.

"The Count entered, very angry and his hand

upon his sword hilt. 'Where is my wife? I saw her come here,' he bellowed. Francesca swore like a gentleman that the lady was not present. The Count insisted and started searching. His eye caught the outline of a lady's foot showing beneath the tapestry. With a loud cry of rage he tore the tapestry to one side and revealed not his Countess but quite another lady! Another of Francesca's lady friends had sought shelter when the Countess entered, behind the tapestries by the window seat. All might have been well had not the Countess, hearing from her hiding-place a woman's voice, been assailed by jealousy and, casting discretion to the winds, come forth breathing fire and brimstone."

"What happened then?" asked Dorning smiling, amused in spite of himself.

"There was a terrific four-handed clash. Poor Francesa was half mad with anxiety. The Count challenged him to a duel. In the fight, Francesca, who, unlike the rest of the Torrianis, was no swordsman, was killed."

"And quite a proper climax to the adventure it was," John Dorning declared soberly.

"Proper—why?" Rodrigo asked. "Because Francesca had been too stupid to learn swordsmanship?"

"No—because of his interest in a lady who belonged to another."

"The lady should not have taken Francesca's love so seriously as to have become jealous.

When will women understand that when they take our admiration seriously they kill it?"

"Not at all," Dorning returned stoutly. "That is exactly the wrong attitude. I do not understand it in you—you who are so intelligent and sensible about other things. There are so many other things for you to interest yourself in than in these petty love affairs."

Rodrigo straightened. He did not relish criticism. In the next instant, realizing that Dorning was honest in his questioning and rather pleased that he had aroused his quiet guest to such a pitch, he relaxed and asked calmly, "What other interests do you recommend for a reckless and extravagant gentleman, like myself, who now finds himself penniless and equipped for nothing in the world but for amusing the ladies and for being amused by them?"

"If you will pardon me—are you really in straightened circumstances?"

"Yes. I am in debt. Economy was not one of my father's virtues, nor did he take the trouble to develop it in me." Rodrigo, fearing to be misunderstood, added, "Not that I am in need of a loan, you undersand. You have done quite enough for me, and I am grateful."

"What are you thinking of doing then?"

"I can either marry the first single rich lady or widow who will have me, or I can sell or rent this place and its contents."

"You would do neither of those two foolish things."

"Why not?" Rodrigo was curious. He was secretly rather pleased at the personal turn the conversation had taken, for, with all his worldliness and experience along romantic lines, it seemed that Dorning's common sense might be valuable in considering the rather dismaying future.

"Have you ever considered entering trade?" Dorning asked tentatively.

"My father was in trade. There is nothing unpleasant about it to me. What sort of trade?"

Thus encouraged, John Dorning revealed what was in his mind. "We—Dorning and Son," he explained, "have gone in recently, to a very extensive degree, for Italian antiques. My mission over here is for the purpose of adding to our stock. Also, if possible, to acquire a man to manage that department of our business, someone who is an expert in that line and who at the same time is fitted to deal with our rather exclusive clientele. It occurs to me that you might be that man, if you would care to consider it."

Rodrigo did not reply at once. He took three or four steps in silence, thoughtfully, away from Dorning. Go to America? Enter business? He recalled the deprecatory manner in which his father had always talked about business and the great relief it had been for the

elder Torriani to leave the Indian trade and settle down at last to be a gentleman again. And he was very much like his father in so many ways. The business of John Dorning, to be sure, was art, something he, Rodrigo, loved. It was not like the mad commercial scramble of ordinary trade. There was nothing commercial about Dorning. Something within Rodrigo said "Go." Something in Dorning's offer was lifting off his mind the almost physical weight that oppressed him every time he considered the future.

"I will accept your offer and return with you to America," Rodrigo said with quiet suddenness.

John Dorning started. He had not suspected such a quick and decisive answer. "Fine," he said. "Can you arrange your affairs to sail with me next week on the Italia?"

Rodrigo was sure that he could. Now that he was committed to the plunge, he was positively gay about it. The two young men spent the rest of the day talking the arrangements over. In the afternoon they journeyed in to Naples in Rodrigo's car and entered an agreement with the fussy Italian real estate agent to rent the palace of the Torrianis to the family of a young American author who had just made a fortune out of a best-selling novel and wished to write its sequel along the romantic shore of the Bay of Naples.

CHAPTER IV

The great floating hotel glided steadily ahead over the smooth, black waters of the Mediterranean. Somewhere within her hull, boiler fires were roaring and a labyrinth of machinery was driving furiously, but only a slight, muffled throb reached the ears of the lone passenger standing at the rail directly under the bridge. Over his head he could hear the regular tread of the watch officer as he paced his monotonous round. In front of him was the dark immensity of the night, broken only when he lowered his eyes to take in the lights from the port-holes and the jagged streaks of phosphorescence streaming back from the bow as it cut the water.

Rodrigo was quite happy. His ripening friendship with Dorning, the new clean life into which every minute of the ship's progress was carrying him, the cool, damp darkness that surrounded him, added to his content. He snapped his cigarette into the Mediterranean and with a peaceful sigh walked into the crowded, brilliantly lighted saloon in search of his friend.

The waiter was standing expectantly at Dorn-

ing's table, while Dorning, menu card in hand, was looking about for Rodrigo. Another man sat at the table with the American, a small, nervous, middle-aged man, who was also fingering a menu.

"I feared you had changed your mind and leaped overboard or something," Dorning smiled as Rodrigo approached. I want you to meet Mr. Mark Rosner, Rodrigo. Mr. Rosner— Count Torriani." Rodrigo bowed and slid into his place at the table.

"Mr. Rosner is an old friend of my father's," Dorning explained. "We met by chance at the door of the saloon."

Rosner elaborated upon the explanation in a rapid, clipped voice. "I worked for Dorning and Son for a long time, Count Torriani. I left them five years ago to open a shop of my own in London. I did rather well, but you know how it is— once an American, always an American. There is no town in the world like New York. I sold out my place in London six months ago. Since then I have been traveling in Italy acquiring a stock, and I am on my way back to New York to go into business there."

He directed his conversation toward Rodrigo, evidently awed a bit by the young Italian's title and reserved manner and anxious to make an impression. Mark Rosner was a rare Jewish type, an impractical æsthete who disliked business life intensely but who nevertheless was consumed by the urge to make money. The

struggle had whitened his mop of unruly hair prematurely, stooped his fat shoulders, and worn his nerves to ragged edges. The truth was that his London venture had been a failure and his new stock had been bought in Italy on borrowed capital. His delight at meeting John Dorning again had been partly caused by genuine pleasure at coming upon the son of a man he had always liked and admired and partly by the thought that he might derive aid later from the Dornings in getting started in New York.

"Count Torriani is to become associated with us in New York," Dorning remarked when the waiter had departed with the three orders. Dorning, now that Rodrigo had arrived, would rather the third party were not present. He remembered Rosner as a valuable employee, but as one who was always timid in taking responsibility and evasive and whining when things went badly. However, he was too kind-hearted to snub the fellow.

Rosner replied in his jerky voice, "Really? You couldn't join a concern with a finer reputation, Count Torriani. Dorning and Son are the leaders in their line in New York, as you probably know. Sometimes I wish I had never left your father, John." Dorning secretly smiled at Rosner's sudden familiarity. "But you know how it is—there is a certain satisfaction in being on your own, in spite of the risk involved."

He went on to relate in considerable detail the difficulties that had beset his venture in London. In the midst of his recital the food arrived. Rodrigo and John Dorning, who were hungry and bored, fell to at once and heard only snatches of the remainder of Rosner's querulous discourse. Englishmen of the art world, according to Rosner, were prejudiced against Americans in the same line of business, particularly Americans of Semitic extraction. He gave instances of alleged discriminations against him.

"I don't suppose, though, that it's much different in New York," Rosner admitted. "I remember many of the old-line concerns were against foreigners there too, and I don't suppose it has changed much. I recall how Henry Madison opposed your father's taking on that Italian sculptor, Rinaldi, and how pleased he was when the chap fell down and had to be let out. You were there then, weren't you, John?"

John did not look over-pleased. "Rinaldi was not the man for the job," he said with a frown. "My father was carried away with his enthusiasm for the man's work in clay. Rinaldi was no good out of his studio, and Madison quickly recognized it. The fact that Rinaldi was a foreigner had nothing to do with the matter."

Rodrigo now listened with interest for the first time since he had sat down at the table. He foresaw that his career with Dorning and

Son might not prove as unruffled as he had anticipated. This did not greatly annoy him. He had little of the eccentric artistic temperament, and there was enough of the merchant blood in him to enable him to adapt himself to office work. At least, he hoped so. If obstacles arose, he would overcome them.

"Who is Mr. Madison?" Rodrigo asked politely.

"He is the manager of our establishment," John explained. "There is no cause for alarm, Rodrigo. He is the most honest, fairest person alive."

Rosner, glancing furtively from one of his tablemates to the other, sensed that he had rather put his foot into it. Why had he not remembered that Count Torriani was a foreigner? He flushed with embarrassment and, to change the subject, asked John, "Is your father still active in the business?"

Dorning's sensitive face clouded. He answered, "No, my father has not been in very good health for the past year or so. He is staying at our place at Greenwich and only gets down to the office once or twice a month."

"Then you have charge?"

"Yes—with the able assistance of Madison and the rest of our staff. It isn't a very difficult job, as you can imagine. The long-standing reputation of Dorning and Son and the organization my father built up don't leave a very great deal for the head of the concern to do."

"All the same, it's quite a responsibility for a young fellow only a few years out of college, John, and I congratulate you." What there was of shrewdness in Mark Rosner now showed in his dark, ineffective eyes. Young Dorning was evidently kind-hearted, and, of necessity, inexperienced. An appeal to him for assistance by an old employee of his father's would probably meet with a favorable response.

After dinner the two younger men contrived to rid themselves of Rosner's company temporarily on the plea that they wished to unpack their bags. Having accomplished this task, they drifted into the smoking-room, where the card players were already hard at it. Waiters were running here and there with tinkling glasses. The air was hazy with the smoke of many cigarettes and cigars.

A corpulent gentleman with the wine-ruddy face and expansive clothes and manners of a London theatrical producer, as indeed he was, approached the two friends as they stood surveying the scene. "Would you two gentlemen care to make up a table at bridge?" he asked.

Bridge was John's favorite diversion. He played a careful, serious-minded game for pleasure rather than for profit. He looked suggestively at Rodrigo, who shrugged affirmatively. The Italian would have been happier at baccarat or some other continental game which moved more quickly than bridge. But he was willing to please, and it occurred to him that

his funds would not permit his participation in baccarat as played in this smoking-room, for a few moments' observation had shown him that the stakes were very high.

The red-faced Englishman guided them over to a table near the stairway. A gaunt, pale, long-haired man was already seated there, surrounded by three tipped-up chairs. He was idly shuffling the cards and dropped them to rise as his companion reappeared. The introductions revealed that the stout Englishman was Gilbert Christy, producer of the Christy Revues, which Rodrigo was familiar with as elaborate girl-and-music shows relying upon well-drilled choruses and trick stage effects rather than cleverness for their success. The lean Englishman was Clive Derrick, leading man in Christy's current show. The Christy Revue was transporting itself overseas, after a brief and rather unremunerative engagement at Rome and Naples, to try its luck on Broadway.

"André Charlot has been filling his pockets in America," boomed Christy, whose voice was as loud as his vest. "Why not I?"

Rodrigo agreed that the chances were excellent, being too polite to explain that Charlot's divertissements were clever, while Christy was about to offer America something which Ziegfeld and other native New York producers were already doing better than anybody else in the world.

Bridge at a shilling a point with the two theatrical men did not prove exciting. The close air in the room and the dullness of the game elicited yawns from Rodrigo after a while. He envied John his ability to enjoy close concentration upon the cards, and apparently not to notice the fact that his opponents were boastful bores, as well as bad bridge players. Due to John's good work, he and Rodrigo were soon so far ahead in the scoring that the eagerness of their partners, who were bad losers and had already begun to quarrel with each other, to find an excuse to abandon the play became pointed. The excuse finally arrived in the form of a dark, pop-eyed little Englishman, who twittered up to Christy like a hesitant robin and said in a low voice, "I'll have to ask your help, Mr. Christy. Binner's bags are missing, and she is raising the devil."

Christy turned upon him wrathfully. "Go find them then. What kind of a company manager are you anyway?"

"I've looked high and low, sir, and they're not to be found. She's storming about her cabin, threatening to return on the next boat, run amuck among the company's baggage in the hold, and all that. She's in a fearful rage."

"Let her rage. God, I've had nothing but trouble with that woman ever since we left London. I might better have left her in the chorus."

"I wish you'd come, sir," the company man-

ager urged timidly. "The other passengers are complaining."

Christy sighed prodigiously, the sigh of a man upon whose shoulders rest the cares and responsibility of almost the entire world. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," he apologized, "but I'll really have to handle this situation personally. Please add up the scores and I'll settle later."

When he had left, Rodrigo, who had taken a sudden lively interest in the dialogue, asked the sad-faced Englishman who remained, "Is the lady's name Sophie Binner?" His tone was more eager than he had intended it.

"Yes," replied Derrick. "Do you know her?"

"Slightly. I met her while I was at Oxford. I spent my vacations in London. She was a chorus girl then."

"She has the ingénue role in this show. Rather a decent voice. And a right pretty girl. But a fearful temper. Thinks she should have everything Trevor—Emily Trevor—the star—gets. Always kicking up a row. I don't see how Christy puts up with her, really." A few minutes later he suggested that Christy might need his help and departed in the direction of the recalcitrant actress' stateroom.

Rodrigo had an impulse to accompany him. Fancy Sophie Binner here on the same ship with him! He discovered to his surprise, for he had thought that their final quarrel in her London apartment had killed whatever attrac-

tion she had had for him, that he was experiencing a pleasant thrill at the anticipation of meeting her again. Worldly, selfish, bad-tempered Sophie. But pretty, tender-eyed Sophie also. He glanced at John, who, engrossed in the mathematics of the scores, had not listened to the revelatory conversation with Derrick. John Dorning, of Dorning and Son, the impeccable old concern of high ideals that Rodrigo was about to enter. Rodrigo sighed. He would have to abandon his wasteful life from now on. No more Sophies. A few nice girls perhaps that Dorning might introduce him to and whom he would have to treat with irreproachable decorum.

He watched the angular back of Clive Derrick disappearing through the door leading to the deck. He would not seek out Sophie. Of course, if he should come upon her accidentally, as he undoubtedly would sooner or later, unless her tantrum or rough weather confined her to her cabin the rest of the voyage, he could not be held accountable for that.

When, a half hour later, John expressed his intention of going to bed, Rodrigo denied that he was sleepy and said he would take a turn or two around the deck. His turn led him to the ballroom, which he entered as casually as his rather guilty conscience permitted. Sophie, he tried to tell himself, was undoubtedly still in her stateroom battling with Christy. But he

knew very well that if there was one thing she preferred to quarreling, it was dancing.

The Italian band was dispensing a not very well executed American jazz tune. The room was fairly crowded with dancers. Rodrigo, smoking in the doorway and surveying the dancers idly, tried to persuade himself that he was looking for no one in particular. In a few minutes he saw her. In a white, creamy costume that harmonized excellently with her fluffy yellow bobbed hair, she looked the picture of animation and content as she gilded by quite close to him in the arms of Gilbert Christy. Rodrigo smiled. It was so much like the Sophie he knew, one minute swearing at a man and the next dancing with him. Admiration was mingled with his smile. She was prettier, better dressed and had more of an air about her than she had possessed when he had known her in London.

When the music stopped, Rodrigo contrived, almost without being aware he was contriving it, to be near Sophie and her partner. He had some uneasiness as to how she would receive him. Their last meeting had been so stormy. Sophie, glancing his way and recognizing him at once, glided up to him and seized both of the hands he outstretched to her. "Rodrigo!" she cried with the smiling exuberance Christy Revue audiences knew so well. "Fancy meeting you here! Do you know Mr. Christy?"

Rodrigo admitted that he did, and the three

walked over toward the seats at the side of the ballroom, Sophie retaining an intimate grip upon Rodrigo's arm.

"Now, dear boy, tell me all that has happened since I saw you last," she bubbled. "Where have you been keeping yourself? Why have you been hiding from all your old friends? Some of the girls we used to pal around with are in this show—Muriel Case, Betty Brewster—do you remember them? But please give me a cigarette, somebody, or I shall perish. Oh, thank you, Rodrigo." She took a second to inhale gratefully. "Has Gil—Mr. Christy told you that I have a featured part in this show? We're on our way to conquer Broadway now—that is, if some fool doesn't mislay my bags again." She flashed her small head at Christy an instant and glowered. Rodrigo wondered if there was some more intimate tie between Sophie and the producer than merely that of artiste and manager.

"But do tell me something about yourself—I'm all thrilled with interest, truly," she rattled on. He had hardly started to accept her invitation when the music shuffled on again, and without waiting for him to ask her, she popped up and held out her arms to him.

Sophie was an adorable dancer, and Rodrigo was quite as expert as she. If her pliant body clung rather closer to his than was necessary, he was surely not the one to protest. He stopped talking and gave himself over to the rhythm of

the dance. For the time being there was nothing in his head except the tom-tom beat of the jazz orchestra and the intoxicating presence of this white, satiny girl. It mattered not that she was shallow, selfish, mascaroed, rouged. She had the power of, for the moment, setting his senses aglow, of banishing the workaday world into oblivion. She had suddenly become a sparkling fountain of pleasure. His mind grasped at length that the music had stopped, they had stopped dancing. As he released Sophie, too hurriedly, she tilted her head and shot a significant little smile up at him. The smile said: "You are still the same old Rodrigo." Was he? The thought disturbed him, because he knew it was almost true. And he did not wish it to be true any longer. He was leaving his old life behind. It had been waste —pleasurable perhaps, but still waste. John Dorning was hereafter to be his ideal.

He led Sophie decorously back to their chair and discovered, to his secret dismay, that Gilbert Christy had departed.

"Oh, thank heaven he's gone," Sophie approved heartily, spreading out her creamy skirts and slipping over very close to Rodrigo when he sat down. "I had a terrible row with him over my bags, you know. He found them under my bunk, after I'd sent the company manager for him, and he got very sarcastic about my helplessness. I made him apologize good and proper, you can bet, before I'd come up and

dance with him, and it isn't over yet. I'm not in the chorus any more. I don't have to get down and grovel." Her wide blue eyes were snapping.

"Aren't you and Christy very close friends then?" asked Rodrigo. She glanced inquiringly at him, as if to detect in his expression what it was he suspicioned. But Rodrigo's face was a mask of innocence.

"One has to keep on the right side of the cove who is paying the bills," said Sophie carelessly. Then, lowering her voice and injecting into it a soft note that was disturbing to him, she asked, "But, Rodrigo, haven't you missed me at all?"

"Many times," he answered.

"We used to have some wonderful hours together."

He moved a little away from her. He started to rise. "I really must be going," he said. "I have something to tell the man I'm traveling with before he goes to bed. You didn't know, did you, Sophie, that I'm entering business in America? With Dorning and Son, the art dealers. John Dorning, the head of the concern, is traveling with me."

This seemed to strike her as funny and she burst into a rather vulgar and throaty laugh. He straightened a bit. "Oh, fancy you in business, Rodrigo," she bubbled. "Will you wear a long linen coat and sit upon a high stool? And this Mr. Dorning—is he nice?"

"He is a fine chap—my best friend."

"You must introduce me. And if you're going to his cabin, you might be a gentleman and escort me to mine."

"I had intended to," he said stiffly. He did not like her laughing at him, as if the thought were ridiculous that he should be a success in business.

She took his arm as they walked out into the darkness of the deck, snuggling close to him as the cool, damp air of the sea struck them. They sauntered back toward the stern of the great ship. She was making a special effort to be nice to him, chattering reminiscences of the old days in a low voice, looking up brightly at him in that laughing way of hers. He hardly answered her. When they had reached the taffrail, with the tall canvas-covered hand steering wheel cutting off the view in front and nothing but the creamy wake churned up by the propeller and the darkness in back of them, they stopped as if by mutual consent. She came close to him. Without a word he took her into his arms.

She did not mind that, a moment later, he released her convulsively and seemed almost angry at her. Her flushed face smiled into the darkness. She still had the power to sway him, and she was well pleased with herself.

"You are still the same," she whispered, "But you must be very proper with me the rest of this voyage. Christy thinks he is in love

with me, and he is very jealous. I have no intention of losing my job. But in New York we can have good times together. I will give you my address. At first I shall live in a hotel and later, if the show is a success, in an apartment, where I can entertain my friends."

Rodrigo was already moving away, and she followed him. He was silent, rather chagrined at himself and her. He left her at the door of her stateroom without offering to kiss her again.

Yet the next day at breakfast he was on the lookout for her, in spite of himself. She did not appear, having breakfasted in her stateroom. Later in the morning, walking the deck with John, they were hailed by a gay feminine voice from a steamer chair. They turned, and Rodrigo saw that it was Sophie and sitting next to her was the ruddy Christy. John was introduced. She muttered something to Christy, who shook his head. She sprang up lightly and seized Rodrigo's arm, crying gayly, "I will walk with you, if you don't mind. I need the exercise. There being no taxis to take him, Gilbert says he will, as usual, remain seated." She flipped back her small head in a mock gesture of scorn at the moody Christy.

Though she locked a friendly hand in John's as well as Rodrigo's arm, it was to the latter that she addressed the bulk of her animated chatter She had sized John up in a flash as a serious-minded young man who would not be

interested in her charms, though he looked quite formidably rich and had a pleasant enough face. Rodrigo strove manfully to include his friend in the conversation and forestalled several attempts on the diplomatic John's part to desert them. Rodrigo did not intend to be left alone with this creature again if he could help it, even in broad daylight.

During the rest of the voyage he really made a determined effort to avoid her. Since the sea soon turned rough and she was a poor sailor, this was not so difficult. To aid him, Gilbert Christy very quickly became aware that Sophie and this too handsome Italian were old friends, and being too wise to send her flying into his rival's arms by quarreling with her about him, the really infatuated Englishman contrived to keep constantly by his ingénue's slim shoulder.

It was not until a day out of New York that, somewhat pale and listless from her indisposition, she established herself in her steamer chair again, Christy sitting in the next chair and guarding her like a very red-faced Cerberus. When the ship docked on a typically blustery New York March morning, she found an opportunity at last to give Rodrigo an important message. Count Torriani and John Dorning, having landed, were standing impatiently beside their luggage in the huge barnlike shed on the dock when, seizing the moment when Christy had stopped some twenty feet

away to bark instructions at the nervous little company manager, Sophie came gliding swiftly between the luggage littering the place.

"I've ducked over a second to say good-bye," she greeted them, though she was looking at Rodrigo. "I'm stopping at the Biltmore, and for goodness' sake, call me up as soon as you get the chance. I'm just a poor English girl all alone in a strange, big city, you know." She looked around, shrugged impatiently. "Oh, dear, the great Christy is beckoning. So long, old dears, and please give me a ring." She blew them a kiss and fled.

CHAPTER V

Like most of its neighbors in the gold-plated Fifth Avenue shopping district intersected by the Fifties, Dorning and Son resembled, from the pavement, more a monastery than a business establishment. Its austere concrete and marble exterior quietly bespoke class and dignity. The graceful little Chinese vase standing chastely alone in exactly the correct spot in the show window seemed a warning to the passers-by on the other side of the highly polished glass that only true lovers of art were wanted within. The reputation of Dorning and Son for integrity and quality was as high as their prices. The original John Dorning, who founded the business in a tiny showroom on Fourteenth Street, had been resting quietly under the sod for twenty years. He had had no impulses in that time to turn over in his grave. He had inculcated in his son the ideals upon which the delicately contrived wedding of art and commerce that was Dorning and Son had been based. The son had later sown the seeds of the same ideals in the character of the third John Dorning. In his keeping, the ideals flourished as never before.

Rodrigo, who had the true artistocrat's respect and liking for the things of the spirit, caught something of this atmosphere immediately he stepped from John Dorning's roadster and walked beside his friend across the broad sidewalk toward the plain bronze entrance door of Dorning and Son.

The uniformed elderly doorman's face lit up as he recognized young Dorning. John shook hands with him with unaffected pleasure.

They entered an austere region that resembled the art gallery of a very well cared for and sumptuous private residence. Soft, deep carpets covered the floor. Painted masterpieces adorned the walls. Exquisite furniture and *objets d'art,* placed with the unostentatious grace of the expert, harmonized into a paradise for the artist and collector. A railed balcony ran around three sides of the large, rectangular shaped room. Under the balcony were located the offices of John Dorning, the manager, Henry Madison, and John Dorning's father.

Rodrigo wondered if the white-haired, dignified gentleman who stood just inside the door as they entered and who now advanced smilingly to greet John was Madison, the man who disliked foreigners. He was rather sorry to hear John address him by another name, for he seemed a pleasant, if slightly gone-to-seed sort. Other clerks became aware of John's return and gathered about to welcome him. There was about them none of the fawning, artificial

pleasantry which subordinates in many establishments lavish upon those in authority over them. These men were more than salesmen, and they were attached to John Dorning both by a personal liking for him and by the common bond of a genuine love for the beautiful.

Attracted by the buzz of conversation and sallies of laughter outside, a tall, gray man opened the door of one of the offices and looked out. Then his rather severe face softened into a smile and he came forward to take both of Dorning's hands in his.

"It's good to see you, John," he said. "We've missed you."

"Thanks, Mr. Madison," John replied. He loved this old friend of his father's. His boyish respect for the man's honesty and uncanny knowledge had not lessened with his own growth of experience. The manager would always be "Mr. Madison" to John Dorning.

"I want you to meet Count Rodrigo Torriani, about whom I cabled and wrote you," said John. Rodrigo bowed and took Madison's outstretched hand. He felt the elderly man's sharp, scrutinizing glance upon him and he returned the glance with a disarming smile.

"I understand from John that you are to be associated with us," said Henry Madison, and the clerks looking on showed a renewed interest in the newcomer. "You can rest assured I shall do all I can to make things pleasant for you." Behind this perfunctory promise the

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

"I HAD NO IDEA I WAS TO MEET A GIRL LIKE YOU SO QUICKLY," RODRIGO SMILED.

manager seemed to be warning that whether or not things *were* made pleasant depended largely upon Rodrigo. This, the Italian said to himself, was fair enough. Madison turned to John and said in a lower voice, "When you have a moment, if I could talk with you privately—there are some matters——"

But John had turned away and was shaking hands with the girl who, coming out of Madison's office with a sheaf of papers, had diverted her course at the sight of Dorning and invaded the group about him. Rodrigo, who had stepped politely aside to let her pass to his friend, was struck at once with her. In spite of the pallor with which office work had bleached her fair complexion, she was beautiful. Silken blond hair arranged skillfully around her well-shaped head, large, expressive blue eyes, lips that were innocent of rouge—all this feminine daintiness contrasted with the brisk, business-like manner in which she walked and the crisp tones of her voice.

"Has anyone told you how wonderful you're looking, John?" she asked. "Your trip has done you good."

"Do you really think so, Mary?" he replied. "I suppose you've got work a mile high piled upon my desk." This last was to tease her, for he knew she would have his desk as clear as the glass in the show-window outside. Then he remembered Rodrigo and said, "This is my

very efficient secretary and assistant, Miss Mary Drake."

She was so thoroughly a creature of business that, in a spirit of mischief, Rodrigo took her hand and kissed it in the continental fashion. She gave him such a searching look for his pains as he straightened up that he actually flushed a little. The blue eyes had gone cold for an instant. They resumed their warmth as she seemed to have satisfied herself that his action had been simply his natural mannerism. John, whom the by-play had secretly amused, continued, "Count Torriani is an expert on Italian art, ancient and modern. He is also a very good friend of mine. He is to join us here and help us out." John was anxious that his two friends should get along well together. Knowing Mary, he had no fears that Rodrigo's good looks would impair her efficiency in the slightest. Indeed it would be better for Mary, John had sometimes thought, if something did come into her life to divert her mind a bit from the hard, monotonous business pace she set herself. Dorning added, "If you'll show Count Torriani into my office, Mary, and answer questions for him, I'll talk with Mr. Madison."

On the way to the polished mahogany door under the balcony, Rodrigo ventured a perfunctory remark to her about the attractiveness of the establishment. Intent upon rearranging the papers in her hand, Mary gave no indications of hearing him. The Italian shrugged his

shoulders, a trifle annoyed. He took advantage of her preoccupation to examine the soft profile of her neck as it disappeared under her fluffy light brown tresses. It was perfect, he decided. What was this America anyway, where girls as potentially beautiful as this were allowed to bury themselves in offices and cultivate a brisk twang in their speech and suspicion of every man who looked at them as if they were human?

He gravely held the door open for her. She sat down in the big arm-chair in front of the massive glass-topped desk. He took the visitor's chair beside the desk, crossing his carefully creased trouser-legs and foraging in his silver case for a cigarette.

"Pardon," he said, "may I smoke?"

She looked up from the papers to ask colorlessly, "Why not?"

He inhaled deeply, blew the smoke toward the ceiling, and, leaning slightly toward her, offered, "You know, I was rather afraid I was going to be lonely in America. I had no idea I was to meet a girl like you so quickly."

She colored a little and said, with affected innocence, "I don't understand. Mr. Dorning said he was your friend. You will not be lonesome. He will introduce you to many nice people, I'm sure. Besides, you have been in America before, haven't you? You must know people here."

"What makes you think so?"

"You are an Italian and you speak English without the trace of an accent."

"Thank you, but one does not have to come to America to learn to speak English. In fact, quite the reverse, many say. It happens that my mother was English, and I am an Oxford man. However, you are right. I have been in America once before."

She had resumed checking the papers, placing them one by one, after a close scrutiny, into the box marked "Outgoing Mail." Rodrigo tried his luck once more on the intimate tack, "Are you fond of the theatre, Miss Drake?"

The look she gave him could not have been construed as friendly. "Yes," she replied. "I go quite often—with my mother." And she returned to her paper with renewed concentration.

After a few moments of silence, Rodrigo rose and pretended a sudden interest in the pictures adorning the office wall. Every now and then he stole a glance back at her bent head. He did not like to admit to himself that he had made no more impression upon this pretty girl than as if he were the chair upon which he had been sitting.

He had hardly resumed his seat when John Dorning and Madison appeared at the door of the office, still talking earnestly together. Madison eyed the scene within, showing the well groomed and handsome Italian edging his chair nearer to Mary Drake and evidently trying to

become better acquainted with her. The manager glanced significantly at Dorning. What met his eye seemed to confirm his belief as to the demoralizing effect of foreigners. John laughed and patted Madison's shoulder, terminating their interview, and Madison walked off.

"Well, have you told Rodrigo all about our business?" Dorning asked his secretary, smiling.

"Count Torriani did not ask me about the business," she replied, rising and making a movement to retire to her own little private office that adjoined Dorning's at the rear. Rodrigo grinned. The girl had a tongue.

Mary walked briskly over to her own sanctum and closed the door behind her.

"Rodrigo, I want you to be good friends with Miss Drake," John said gravely in a confidential voice. "She has this whole business at her finger tips—a remarkable girl in every way. Good as gold. She can smooth the way for you here better than anyone else can. Everybody likes and respects her and will be strong for anybody she sponsors. There is no nonsense about Mary Drake. She is all business."

"But, John," Rodrigo asked, genuinely puzzled, "you called her 'Mary' out there. Is that the custom with employers and their secretaries over here?"

"Mary isn't merely my secretary," Dorning explained. "Her family and ours were old

friends in the days when—well, when her father had his money. He lost it in Wall Street just before he died, and Mary had to go to work to support herself and her mother. It was pretty tough. She was seventeen at the time and had always had everything. Dad gave her a job here after she got out of business school. She was an art student before she studied stenography. I believe she keeps up her art lessons at night still. She has a natural aptitude for this line of work, and she is invaluable to me here. If anything happened to Mary, I don't know what I'd do."

Rodrigo wondered if Dorning was in love with this girl.

The entrance of a somewhat distraught clerk, bearing in his hand a slender porcelain vase, interrupted the conversation. The clerk approached Dorning diffidently and, somewhat embarrassed, said, "Mrs. Porter Palmer is out there, Mr. Dorning. She is interested in this vase, but she has some doubts that it is a genuine Menotto. I have assured her that it is, and she, of course, knows the reputation of our house. But she has learned that you have returned, and she says she must see you in person about the vase."

Dorning restrained, in front of the clerk, his real feelings at this news and replied, "Tell Mrs. Palmer I'll be with her directly." To Rodrigo, when the clerk had departed with the dignified unobtrusiveness characteristic of

Dorning and Son clerks, John exclaimed, "Oh, bother Mrs. Porter Palmer! She's a fussy society dowager with more money and time than she knows what to do with. She is a good customer of ours, but a frightful nuisance. She knows my father socially, and she thinks that puts us all under obligations to her. Come along out with me, Rodrigo—perhaps you can impress her with your knowledge of Italian art. You'll have to meet her sooner or later anyway."

The ample and elaborately gowned form of Mrs. Porter Palmer was draped upon a chair that seemed rather too fragile to support the weight imposed upon it. She was tapping her expensively shod foot impatiently and answering the polite clerk in irritated monosyllables as John and Rodrigo came up to her.

"Ah, Mrs. Palmer, I'm glad to see you again." John smiled and shook hands. "May I present my friend, Count Torriani, who is to be associated with us here?"

Mrs. Porter Palmer's face brightened at once. The title had made a decided impression, as did the aristocratic appearance of Rodrigo and the suave manner in which he kissed her hand. Her tone was almost apologetic as she said to John, "I didn't intend to make a fuss about this vase. But it is such a little thing and you are asking such a tremendous price. I want to make sure it is genuine."

Without a word Dorning took the vase

from the clerk's hand and transferred it to Rodrigo's. "Count Torriani knows Italian antiques perfectly," he explained.

Rodrigo could see at a glance the worth of the gracefully moulded porcelain, but he went through the motions of examining it critically. "I can assure you it is the work of the elder Menotto, and very rare," he gave his verdict. "I have the exact companion piece to this one at home in Italy."

"Really?" beamed Mrs. Palmer. She would have taken his word for anything at that moment. She was a fussy old *grande dame* who made a specialty of collecting young men and old art treasures.

"Then I shall have to take it, of course. Send it to my home, young man," she shrilled to the clerk. "You know the address."

Having concluded the business of the vase, she seemed loathe to depart from this very interesting-looking new find—an Italian Count, no less! John had moved away, and she kept chattering on to Rodrigo in her peculiarly irritating, metallic voice, bent upon leading the conversation into more personal channels. Rodrigo, who didn't mind for that moment being bored, led her on gently. It was fifteen minutes before she glanced at the large diamond-and-platinum watch upon her ample wrist and exclaimed in shocked surprise. "My goodness, I'm due at Pierre's for lunch this instant. I hope I may have the pleasure of entertaining

you soon at my home, Count Torriani. I have one of the finest art collections in New York, and I think you'll be interested in seeing it."

He accompanied her politely to the door and assured her that he looked forward with eager anticipation to any invitations she might be kind enough to extend to him.

John congratulated him dryly when they were together again. "You have made your first sale, Rodrigo," he rallied his friend, "and to one of our best and most difficult customers. I feel that you are going to be a great success."

Rodrigo, happening to look in the direction of John's office, saw Mary Drake, having donned a plain but attractive hat and severely cut tailored coat over her navy blue business suit, advance toward the door on her way to luncheon. She smiled at John. For Rodrigo she had a friendly but reserved nod. He wondered if he really was going to prove a great success with the particular part of Dorning and Son that was Mary Drake.

CHAPTER VI

The next few weeks were probably the most tranquil Rodrigo Torriani had ever known. To his own surprise, he enjoyed them. His liking for John Dorning deepened as he saw in what general admiration for his character and respect for his business ability his friend was held. In their private lives together, John displayed a simple unselfishness, a personal attractiveness, and an even temper that bound Rodrigo, who was used to far different associates, ever closer to him.

The Italian was given the center office, the one formerly occupied by John Dorning's father. To John's concealed amusement, Rodrigo thereupon hired the homeliest and oldest stenographer who answered his advertisement for an assistant. As the new executive's familiarity with the routine of Dorning and Son increased, he was given more and more important duties. At the end of the third week, he was dispatched to Philadelphia to conclude the sale of some pieces of Italian pottery to a rich private collector. It was in the nature of a try-out. Rodrigo's success there was rapid and complete. He was as elated as a school-

boy upon his return, and John no less so. Even Mary Drake, who was present when Rodrigo invaded Dorning's office and related the news, smiled with genuine pleasure and congratulated him.

Mary was gradually changing her mind about the newcomer. If the truth be known, her coldness at first meeting him had had an element of the defensive about it. He was far different from the men she usually encountered in the bustling world she had created for herself. In spite of herself, he, from the start, stirred something warm and vibrant within her. She did not like it, was afraid. She wanted to be free from everything of a personal nature that interfered with her making a living for herself and her mother, whom she loved passionately. Now that Rodrigo was attending strictly to business and avoiding any mention of the personal in his necessary daily dealings with her, she was more friendly with him. She was not sure but that, if he would ask her to go to the theatre with him now, she would accept.

Rodrigo was keeping strictly the good resolution he had made the day he landed in America. He was determined to reward John Dorning for the kindness he had shown him in pulling him out of a bad hole and setting him on the way to a business success by going straight, blinding himself to the lure of Broadway, only two blocks away, and the life of pleasure. Rodrigo did not deceive himself. He had not

been suddenly transformed into a hermit. The tug of the old life was with him constantly. There were moments when he wanted to smash everything connected with Dorning and Son and run.

This would not be difficult, he knew. He had only to call up the Hotel Biltmore, for instance, and ask for Miss Sophie Binner. True, this attraction was removed after the first week. He read in the theatrical section of the paper that Christy's Revue had departed from New York for a preliminary seasoning on the road before opening on Broadway. Once, at least, during that week Sophie had called him at the office. At least his secretary had said that "a Miss Skinner caller," and he was sure the correct name had been "Binner." He had ignored the overture. With Sophie braving the March winds in Bridgeport and Stamford, gayety still had a local representative in the person of William Courtney Terhune, Rodrigo's Oxford classmate and his companion upon his other riotous sojourn in America. Bill Terhune always had time for the spending of large sums of time and money on pleasure. Rodrigo knew he had but to call him on the telephone, if he desired at any moment to shake off the austerity of Dorning and Son. He even looked up Bill's number in a weak moment and discovered the former Rhodes scholar had his office within five blocks of him.

John Dorning had generously installed Rod-

rigo in the comfortable bachelor apartment which he maintained on Park Avenue, almost directly east from his place of business. It was a roomy, immaculately kept establishment, furnished with Dorning's favorite pieces, picked up on many journeys to the art shrines of the world. A housekeeper came in once a day to lend the place the benefit of a feminine hand.

Rodrigo quickly discovered that John's private life was the direct antithesis of what his own had hitherto been. The man seemed to be unconscious that Broadway existed. On the occasions when he took Rodrigo out to his friends' houses for tea, the people present were the intensely refined sons and daughters of the house or colorless mutual acquaintances and their equally colorless wives.

He attended concerts and exhibitions with John. He talked gravely with the members of John's exclusive clubs, older men with their heads full of business and their thin, white lips full of black cigars, when John took him to dinner at these rather depressing places.

On two or three occasions John invited Rodrigo to luncheon at a small eating club located upon the second floor of a wooden structure which for some unknown reason had been left standing between two skyscrapers on Forty-Fifth street, just off Fifth Avenue. The club-rooms were skimpily furnished, draughty as a barn, and cried for the vacuum cleaner.

The food was execrable. But the members made up for all that. They were authors and artists for the most part, most of them bearing well known names. They were colorful, interesting people, and among them was an informal commaraderie that intrigued Rodrigo at once. It was a rule at this club that guests must make speeches after luncheon. Rodrigo, who somehow felt almost immediately at home amid this witty talk, foolery, and, at times rather Rabelaisian repartee, obliged with a rapid, nonsense monologue regarding his impressions of America, that took at once. Later, the other guest, a famous pianist, protested in broken English that a speech was impossible. "Bang the box then!" shouted a raucous, good-natured voice. The meaning was explained to him, and he allowed himself to be propelled gently to the battered piano. Deftly produced melody filled the ancient rooms. The company was silent, drinking it in. Eyes were half closed. Concentrated here was the finest audience in America for this sort of thing. The musician played an encore. Then he rose, bobbing his long hair back and forth to the clapping and shouts of applause, and waved away requests for more.

"You play—and the Count will sing!" was a loud-voiced happy thought from somewhere in the back of the room. Others took it up. They fairly pushed Rodrigo to the piano. John Dorning, who was a little out of place in the

extremely informal turn the entertainment had taken, looked worried. He did not think Rodrigo could sing. But the latter was unruffled. He was thoroughly agreeable. He whispered to the dark man at the piano, who was himself an Italian. The pianist struck the opening chords of a Sicilian love song.

Rodrigo's voice was not strong, but it was a clear and pleasing baritone. He was extremely fond of the song, and he put into it a true Latin fervor. For the time being he seemed transported out of this shabby room in the teeming heart of New York. He was back beside the shining waters of the Bay of Naples. He was singing of moonlight and a warm, dark-eyed girl in his arms. All the repression of the past weeks was in his voice. He sang as one inspired. The song died away finally to clamorous applause. But he would not sing again. He resumed his seat beside John Dorning. John looked at him, a queer expression of mingled surprise and pride in his friend's achievement in his pale face. Rodrigo was flushed, a little excited, a little frightened that this simple little love song such as the Sicilian peasants sing could stir him so.

The following week-end, Rodrigo accepted John's invitation to journey to Greenwich and visit Dorning's father. They were met at the station by the Dorning limousine, containing a chauffeur and a pleasant-faced woman some five or six years older than John and looking very

much like him. This was Alice Pritchard, John's married sister, who, with her husband, a Wall Street man, made their home with Henry Dorning. The latter was a widower, John's mother having died when the son was a boy of twelve. The same even disposition and reserve that were so integral a part of John's character were also possessed by his sister. She was almost the exact feminine counterpart of her brother in more than looks, Rodrigo decided during the brief ride to the Dorning home.

They drew up at a large rambling field-stone house set in several acres of well-kept lawn facing Long Island Sound. The elderly man seated in a rocking-chair on the broad front piazza, a steamer rug spread out upon his knees, did not rise as the trio from the car approached him. Henry Dorning was a semi-invalid. The Dornings were not a very robust family, committed as they were to the æsthetic rather than to the athletic life. Too close application to carrying on the tradition of his strong-willed father had done for Henry Dorning. He had quit five years too late.

John Dorning greeted his father cheerily and introduced Rodrigo. The latter had evidently been well heralded in advance. Henry Dorning welcomed him warmly. A three-cornered conversation upon an art subject engaged them almost immediately, Alice maintaining an interested silence and soon slipping into the house to supervise the preparation of dinner.

Just before the meal, Warren Pritchard, Alice's husband, was driven up in the same car that had brought John and Rodrigo from the station. He was a breezy, square-jawed American type, a graduate of Yale who was already well established as one of the minor powers in the financial district. He swept up upon the porch like a gust of wind, kissed his wife, shook hands lustily with John, and had a cheery word with his father-in-law. Upon being introduced to Rodrigo, he shot a keen glance at the Italian and raised his dark bushy eyebrows slightly at the mention of the title. But was evidently ready to accept Rodrigo upon the Dorning's say-so, and was cordial enough.

Pritchard's aggressive materialism seemed at first incongruous in the midst of the Dornings. But Rodrigo quickly corrected his first surmise that the fellow had married Alice Dorning for her money. Pritchard had too evident a deep and abiding love for his wife, and respect for her family for that. Rodrigo liked him.

After dinner the men smoked and later adjourned to the softly lighted billiard room on the top floor of the house. Warren Pritchard assisted his fragile father-in-law up the stairs, and the latter was an interested spectator of the spirited game in which Alice and Rodrigo were partners against John and Pritchard. The family retired early. Rodrigo was assigned to a spacious bedroom in the front of the house.

He closed his eyes in an almost rural stillness that was disturbed only by the April wind rustling gently through the leafing elm tree outside his window and the waters of the Sound plopping against the dock.

Following breakfast the next morning. Warren Pritchard who looked fresh and husky in a tweedy knickerbocker suit, asked briskly, "Well, who's for golf? How about you, Count Torriani?"

Rodrigo looked questioningly at John. He was himself very fond of the game and, having enjoyed a very restful sleep, was eager for the exercise.

"Rodrigo will go with you, Warren," suggested John. "He can use my clubs. I promised Ted Fernald I'd run over this morning to that house he's building in the Millbank section and look over his interior decoration plans with him."

Rodrigo offered at once, "I'll go along with you, John, if you like. Perhaps I can help."

Henry Dorning, who had been listening, put in to John, "Why don't you forget business for this morning, John, and play golf? You look a bit drawn. Fernald can wait."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'd really like to play. But I promised Fernald over a week ago, and he'll be waiting for me. But you go ahead with Warren, Rodrigo. I can take care of Fernald all right, and there's no use spoiling your fun."

Rodrigo consented to be persuaded. Chang-

ing into his golf suit, which he had slipped into his bag at the last moment on the chance of getting an opportunity to play, and equipped with John's clubs, which looked very new and shiny, he slid into the seat of the roadster beside Pritchard.

"I'm sorry John couldn't come with us," Pritchard commented between puffs of his pipe as he swung the car rapidly from the bluestone drive onto the macadam road. "He sticks too close to the grind. A chap needs some sport over the week-end. I'd pass out cold if I didn't get in my eighteen holes Sundays."

Prichard was evidently well known and well liked at the Greenwich Country Club. He had no difficulty in making up a foursome from among the crowd clustered about the first tee. Rodrigo was introduced to a Mr. Bryon and a Mr. Sisson, men of about Pritchard's own age and standing. The latter and his guest teamed against the two other men at a dollar a hole. Rodrigo was quite aware that the eyes of the other three players were critically upon him as he mounted the tee. He made a special effort to drive his first ball as well as possible. He had learned golf at Oxford and was a good player. But he had not hit a ball for months and was uncertain how the lay-off and the strange clubs he was using would affect his game. However, he got off a very respectable drive straight down the fairway and was rewarded by the approbation of his mates.

After the first few holes, in which Rodrigo more than held his own, the other developed a more friendly and natural attitude toward the titled foreigner. Rodrigo, due to his English training, his predilection for Americans like Terhune at Oxford, and his previous visit to the States, together with his unaffectedness and adaptability, had few of the marked unfamiliar characteristics of the Latin. Soon he was accepted on a free and easy footing with the others. He laughed and chaffed with them and had a very good time indeed.

Warren Pritchard took golf too seriously to derive much diversion out of it. The money involved did not mean anything to him, but he was the sort of intensely ambitious young American who always strove his utmost to do even the most trivial things well. He whooped with childish joy at extraordinary good shots by either himself or Rodrigo. At the end of the match, which the Dorning representatives won by a substantial margin, he congratulated the Italian heartily and uttered an enthusiastic tribute to his game. Pritchard seemed more at home with average, go-getting Americans like Bryon and Sisson than he had with the Dornings, Rodrigo thought. On the way back from the links, they post-mortemed the match gayly. Warren Pritchard, who had been inclined to look a little askance at first at his brother-in-law's rather exotic acquaintance, was now

ready to concede Rodrigo was very much all right.

Having taken a shower and changed his clothes, Rodrigo came down and pulled up a chair beside Henry Dorning on the front piazza. Alice had at the last moment joined John in his ride over to the Fernalds, it seemed, and Warren was down at the stables talking with the caretaker of the estate.

Henry Dorning remarked pleasantly that John and Alice had not returned as yet but would doubtless be back any moment. "I am somewhat worried about John," the elderly man continued. "He is not so very strong, you know, and he applies himself altogether too steadily to business. He tells me that you are rapidly taking hold and are of great assistance to him already." He looked intently at Rodrigo, as if debating with himself whether or not to make a confidant of him. Then he asked quietly, "You like my son very much, do you not?"

"Very much," Rodrigo said promptly.

"He is a young man of honor and of considerable artistic and business ability besides," said John's father. "Sometimes though, I wonder if he is not missing something in life. For a man of his age, he is singularly ignorant of some things. Of the world outside of his own business and family, for instance. I feel that I can speak freely to you, Rodrigo—if you will permit me to call you that upon such short

acquaintance. He admires you very much, and I think you are destined to be even closer friends than you are now."

"I hope so," acknowledged Rodrigo.

"You are a man of the world. You can see for yourself that John's development has been —well, rather one-sided. It is largely my own fault, I admit. He has been reared upon Dorning and Son from the cradle. But there are other things in life. He has no predilection whatever, for instance, for feminine society. Oh, he adores his sister and he mingles with women and girls we know. But he takes no especial interest in any of them except Alice. That is wrong. Women can do a lot toward developing a man. They can do a lot of harm to a man, too, but that has to be risked. A man has not reached real maturity until he has been violently in love at least once. He does not acquire the ability to look upon life as a whole until he has been through that. Of that I am quite convinced."

Had John told his father of Rodrigo's former career of philandering? The Italian wondered. Then he decided that John was no talebearer. Henry Dorning must have deduced from his guest's general air of sophistication and his aristocratic extraction that he was worldly wise.

The elder Dorning went on, "I have sometimes wondered what will happen to John when he has his first love affair. Because sooner or

later it will happen, and it will be all the more violent because of its long postponement. And the girl is quite likely to be of the wrong sort. I can imagine an unscrupulous, clever woman setting out deliberately to ensnare my son for his money and succeeding very handily. He is utterly inexperienced with that type of woman. He belives they are all angels. That's how much he knows about them. He is so much the soul of honor himself that, though he has developed a certain shrewdness in business matters, in the affairs of the heart he is an amateur.

"John is such a sensitive, high-strung boy. It is quite conceivable that an unfortunate love affair would ruin his whole life. He would be without the emotional resiliency to recover from such a catastrophe that the average man possesses. I am boring you with all this, Rodrigo, because I believe you can help him. Without in any way appointing yourself either his chaperon or his guide to worldly things, I think you can gradually draw him a little out of his present narrow way of life. You are a very attractive man, and John is not exactly unpleasing to the feminine eye. Together you could meet people who are engaged upon the lighter things of life. Frivolous, pleasure-loving people. People of Broadway. Enter into New York's night life. Go to Greenwich Village, Palm Beach, Newport. Loaf and play. It will do you both good.

"Of course I am very selfish in this as far

as you are concerned. I am thinking primarily of my son and his future. As soon as he told me about you, I secretly rejoiced that he had made such a friend—a cosmopolitan, a man who presumably knew the world. I had hoped that my son-in-law, Warren, might prove such a companion for John. But Warren is too much in love with his wife and too engrossed in his business. In the matter of taking time to play, he is almost as bad as John."

Rodrigo smiled rather dourly to himself. He appreciated that Henry Dorning's diagnosis of John was correct. He was sensible of the honor paid him by the elderly man's confidence and request. But it impressed him as ironical that he should now be urged by John's father to resume his former mode of life, and to resume it to aid the very man for whom he had forsaken it.

Nevertheless, he was about to indicate his willingness to conspire with Mr. Dorning for the education of his son when the object of their discussion, accompanied by Alice, was whirled up the drive in the limousine. John joined the two men on the porch and Alice, with the object of speeding dinner, disappeared into the house.

With a significant and quite unnecessary glance at Rodrigo, Mr. Dorning changed the subject. John offered some laughing comment upon the eccentric ideas of his friend, Edward Fernard, as to interior decoration and inquired about Rodrigo's golf. The conversation lulled

a bit and then Henry Dorning, as if recalling something that had for the time being escaped his mind, said, "Mark Rosner is back from Europe. He was up to see me the other day."

"Yes, I told you he crossed with us," John replied. "I understand he has bought a building on Forty-Seventh Street, a converted brown-stone front and intends opening up an antique shop very soon."

"That's what he came to see me about," Mr. Dorning commented dryly. "He wanted me to take a mortgage on the property, so that he could buy it."

"Did you do it?"

"Yes. Fifteen thousand dollars."

John frowned. "I wish he hadn't bothered you about that. He is such a nervous, irritating little man. He could just as well have come to me, and you wouldn't have been annoyed."

"I didn't mind. And you needn't either, John. I got in touch with Bates and he is taking care of the whole matter. We can both dismiss it from our minds." Emerson Bates was the Dornings' very efficient and very expensive lawyer. Mr. Dorning smiled reminiscently. "Rosner was always such a fretty, worried type, as you say. I tried diplomatically to dissuade him from attempting a big undertaking such as he is in for. He hasn't the temperament or the business ability to swing it. If anything goes wrong, he is liable to suffer a nervous breakdown or worse. This failure

in London nearly did for him for a while, I understand. And he tells me he married over there, and they have two small children. Such men should be kept out of large business undertakings. They aren't built for it."

"And yet you advanced him fifteen thousand dollars," John smiled affectionately at his father. He knew this white-haired man's weakness for helping others. He had inherited it himself.

"Well, Rosner was with me quite a while at the shop. He is getting along in years now, and he is fearfully anxious to make a success. We old chaps have to stick together, you know."

As Alice appeared in the broad doorway, announcing dinner, John Dorning put a tender arm about his father to assist him from his chair. There was something touching and ennobling in the scene to Rodrigo, watching them, and something a little pathetic too.

CHAPTER VII

When Rodrigo reached his office the next morning, his exasperatingly efficient spinster secretary had long since opened his mail and had the letters, neatly denuded of their envelopes, upon his desk. That is, all but one. She had evidently decided that this one was of too private a nature for her to tamper with. The envelope was pale pink and exuded a faint feminine scent. It was addressed in the scrawly, infantile hand of Sophie Binner and was postmarked Montreal. Rodrigo fished it out of the pile of business communications, among which it stood out like a chorus girl at a Quaker meeting, and, breaking the seal, read it:

Dearest Rod,

Why the elusiveness, dear boy? I called you up three times. I hope it was accidental that I couldn't reach you, though it looks bad for poor Sophie, since you never tried to get in touch with me as you promised. Or did you?

Well, I'm here with the show in Montreal. They decided to get us ready up here among our own kind be-

fore springing us upon the Yankees. But it's so lonesome. Christy is such a bore.

We open in New York a week from to-night. Times Square Theatre. How about a party after the show? I can get some of the other girls if you like. But would prefer just us two. You know—like the good old days in London. I miss you dreadfully, dear boy. Do drive my blues away as soon as I get back to the U. S. A. Be nice to me. And write.

Your loving
SOPHIE.

Rodrigo smiled wryly as he folded up the letter and slipped it into his pocket. He had received scores of such communications from Sophie. He had been used to replying to them in kind. He had seldom been temperate in his letters to her. He rather prided himself upon the amount of nonsense he was able to inject into plain black ink. That had been the trouble in the case of his *billets doux* to Rosa Minardi.

But he was not thinking of Rosa at the present moment. It had occurred to him that some use might be made of the invitation in the pink letter in connection with the promise he had made to Henry Dorning to broaden John's horizon. By Jove, he would take up Sophie's suggestion for a party on the night of the New

York opening of the Christy Revue. He would invite John and another of Sophie's kind to accompany them. Pretty, thrill-seeking Sophie —she was certainly a great little horizon-broadener. And he would leave it to her to pick from the Christy company another coryphee of similar lightsomeness.

He resolved to set the ball rolling at once and, the rest of his mail unread, rose and started into the neighboring office. Opening the door of John's sanctum, he stopped for a moment to view the tableau inside.

Two blond heads were bent absorbedly over a letter on John's desk, a man's and a woman's. They were talking in low voices, and Mary Drake's pencil was rapidly underscoring certain lines in the letter. She was advancing an argument in her soft, rapid voice, evidently as to how the letter should be answered. John was frowning and shaking his head.

Rodrigo, standing watching them, wondered why they were not in love with each other. Here was the sort of woman John needed for a wife. Though he could not catch her exact words, he gathered that she was trying to influence him to answer this letter in much more decided fashion than he had intended. That was Mary Drake all over. Thoroughly business-like, aggressive, looking after John's interests, bucking him up at every turn. That was the trouble as far as love was concerned. John regarded her as a very efficient cog in the

office machinery rather than as a woman. And yet she was very much of a woman. Underneath the veneer of almost brusqueness, there was a tender stratum, as Rodrigo thought he had discovered in her unguarded moments. Love could be awakened in Mary Drake by the right man, and it would be a very wonderful sort of love.

Rodrigo asked himself if he really wanted John Dorning to be the awakener. Something in his own heart seemed to protest. Watching her, a feeling of tenderness for her swept over him. He had never again sought jauntily to flirt with her as he had attempted to do that first day he met her. A deeper feeling for her, such as he had never experienced before for any woman, was being slowly kindled within him. And this feeling was steadily growing deeper as she began admitting him to her friendship on much the same status that John Dorning enjoyed.

She glanced up and saw Rodrigo. Smiling good-morning to him and quickly gathering up John's letters, including the one under debate, and her stenographic notebook, she made a movement to retire to her own office.

"Don't let me drive you away, Mary," Rodrigo said in a genial voice.

"You're not. I was just going anyway." She turned to Dorning. "Then I'll write Mr. Cunningham we cannot take care of him until he pays for the other consignment?"

John hesitated, then he nodded affirmatively. "You're absolutely ruthless, Mary," he protested ruefully, "and you may lose us a good customer, as well as the money he owes us. But perhaps you know best. Go ahead—write him as you like."

She enjoyed her little triumph. "Don't worry, John. I know Mr. Cunningham, and he's no person to be treated with silk gloves on." And she hurried into her office and closed the door behind her. In an instant they heard the hurried clack of her typewriter.

"John, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed that little visit with your folks," Rodrigo began sincerely.

John beamed. "That's fine. And I can tell you they liked you too."

Rodrigo continued, "Maybe I'm to have the chance soon to repay you in some small measure. Do you remember Sophie Binner, the English actress we met on the ship coming over? The pretty blonde we walked around the deck with?" After a slight pause, John concluded he did.

Rodrigo produced the little pink missive from his pocket and flourished it. "Well, Sophie has invited you and me to a party the night her show opens here in town. A week from to-night. It will be a nice, lively time. You'll like it. Shall I answer her it's a date?"

John shot a questioning glance at Rodrigo. The latter wondered uneasily if his friend was

interpreting the invitation as a sign Rodrigo was back-sliding a bit. "She particularly wants to see you," Rodrigo hastened to lie. Then, impulsively, "Oh, let's go, John. We both need a change, a little tonic. I know you don't care for Sophie's kind of people or entertainment usually. Neither do I—any more. But, for one night, I think it would be a lot of fun. We could go to some night club, see the sights, dance around a little, leave them at their hotels, and go on home. What do you say?"

Perhaps John agreed with him. Perhaps it was merely the eagerness in Rodrigo's voice that swung him. At least he finally concluded, "You're right. We have been sticking pretty close. I'll be glad to come along, though the girls will probably find me a bit slow."

"Nonsense," cried Rodrigo, and slapped his friend lustily on the back. "That's fine," he added. "I'll write Sophie directly."

Falling into an old habit, he started the letter "Dearest Sophie" almost subconsciously and he used rather intimate language, without paying much heed to what he was doing. He *would* rather like to see Sophie again and bask in her effulgence for a few hours. But as she would be merely the means of carrying out his and Henry Dorning's purpose, he excused himself. There would be none of the old thrill in flattering her in ink, he feared, as he sat down to write her. Yet he surprised himself with

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

"COME ON OUTSIDE AND I'LL SHOW YOU HOW MUCH OF A SHEIK YOU ARE,"
SNARLED HIS ANTAGONIST.

the warmth he worked up in the letter to her.

He received an immediate reply from her. She was tickled as pink as her note-paper, he gathered. He wrote her two more notes, even more affectionate than the first—one had to pretend to be mad over Sophie or she would lose interest at once—and was rewarded with many long, scrawled pages telling of joy over their coming meeting, the selection of one Betty Brewster as "a great sport and a neat little trick" as the fourth member of the party, complaints about Christy and the neutral reception the show had received in Canada.

John Dorning's coming-out party was assuming the proportions of a festive affair.

John himself made no further mention of it. Rodrigo did not remind him, having a feeling that his friend might shy off if he gave the matter much thought. Then, on the morning of the Christy Revue opening, Rodrigo as offhandedly as possible spoke of their engagement that evening. And John, looking blankly, and then confusedly, said, "Why, Rodrigo, I thought I told you. I'm leaving for Philadelphia this afternoon to attend the dinner of the Rand Library trustees. You knew we'd put in a bid to furnish the fresco work for the new building."

Rodrigo's face fell. But his first feeling of irritation and disappointment passed quickly. John was so frankly mortified. He *had* so completely forgotten all about Sophie. It was al-

most funny. Rodrigo said, "Can't you put off your trip? Sophie will be very much disappointed."

"You know I can't postpone it," John faltered. "The dinner at Philadelphia was arranged especially for me. I'll have to go."

Rodrigo shrugged. "Well, I dare say I can patch it up with Sophie. We'll make it some other time. I'll give her a ring later and call it off for to-night."

"Rodrigo, I hope I haven't caused you any inconvenience. I'll be glad to go out with your friends any other time you say," John pleaded.

"Oh, don't worry, old boy. I'll fix it up. You just go right ahead down to Philadelphia, and bring home that contract. Business before pleasure, you know."

But, around six o'clock, Rodrigo wondered if that were such an excellent motto after all. He had been too busy all day to call Sophie. Dorning and Son closed at five o'clock, and he was all alone there now in the deserted quasi-mausoleum. Mary Drake, who was usually a late worker, had left in the middle of the afternoon, because her mother was not feeling well. Now that the party with Sophie was definitely off and he had nothing but a long lonesome evening to look forward to, Rodrigo had a feeling of disappointment. He had been working hard and faithfully for three months, and he had been looking forward to this evening of pleasure. He deserved it, by Jove.

On an impulse, he located Bill Terhune's telephone number and picked up the instrument. Waiting while the bell buzzed, he told himself that Terhune had probably long since left his office. He half guiltily hoped the former Oxonian had. But Terhune's familiar voice smote his ear with a bull-like "Hullo!"

This was followed by a roar of joyous surprise as Rodrigo identified himself. Agitated questions and replies. Rodrigo broached the proposition of appointing his delighted listener a substitute for John Dorning on the Sophie Binner junket.

"Fine! Great!" fairly shouted Terhune. "I'll call my wife up and tell her I've dropped dead or something."

"Bill—you're married?" questioned Rodrigo.

"Sure. All architects have to get married. It gives them the necessary standing of respectability that gets the business. I even live in Jersey. Think of that, eh? Don't worry about my wife. I can fix it up. She's used to having me stay in town over-night, and has gotten tired of asking questions. I'll bring the liquor, too. What's that? Oh, sure—we need liquor. This Binner baby's a regular blotter, if I remember her rightly. I've got a stock right here in the office. Good stuff too. I'll meet you in the lobby of the Envoy. I'll take a room there for the night. What's that? Oh, no—couldn't think of staying at your place. You

know me, Rod—what would your cultured neighbors say, eh? Don't forget now—lobby of the Envoy at six-thirty. I'll dash right around there now and book a room."

Bill Terhune had already registered at the plush-lined Hotel Envoy and was waiting at the desk, key in one hand and a suitcase in the other, when Rodrigo walked in. Terhune was bigger, especially around the waistline, and more red-faced than ever, Rodrigo saw at a glance. The waiting man greeting the Italian with a lusty roar, bred on the broad Dakota prairies, that could be heard all around the decorous, palm-decorated lobby.

"Well, well," Bill rumbled, "who would have thought the Count would have come to this, eh? But say, boy, I'm sure glad to see you. Come up and have a drink. Hey, bellboy! Grab that bag, will you, and be very careful with it too. It contains valuable glassware."

Up in the twelfth floor room which Bill had hired for the night at a fabulous stipend, the American at once dispatched the bellboy for ice, glasses, and White Rock. Then he disrobed, sputtered in the shower-bath for a few minutes, rubbed himself a healthy pink and dressed in his dinner clothes, which he had brought along in his bag.

"Always keep them at the office," he chuckled. "I can't tell when I might have an emergency call." He poured bootleg Scotch into the glasses and rocked the ice around with a spoon.

"How do you get away with it, Bill?" Rodrigo asked, smiling. "I thought American wives were regular tyrants."

"That's how much you foreigners know," scoffed Bill. "All women love my type. You can always keep their love by keeping them wondering. That's my system—I keep my wife wondering whether I'm coming home or not." He handed Rodrigo a full glass with a flourish. "To good old Oxford," he toasted with mock reverence. Rodrigo echoed the toast.

The Italian refused another drink a few minutes later, though his action did not discourage Terhune from tossing off another. In fact, the genial Bill had three more before he agreed that they had better eat dinner if they wished to make the Christy Revue by the time the curtain rose. Rodrigo did not fancy Bill's taking on an alcoholic cargo that early in the evening. Bill was a nice fellow, but he was the sort of chronic drinker who, though long habit should have made him almost impervious to the effects of liquor, nevertheless always developed a mad desire to fight the whole world after about the fifth imbibing.

They descended in the elevator, Bill chattering all the while about his pleasure at seeing his old friend again and about the extreme hazards of the architect business in New York. A small concern like his didn't have a chance, according to Bill. The business was all in the hands of large organizations who specialized in

specific branches of construction, like hotels, residences, restaurants and churches, and made money by starving their help.

After dinner the two men made jerky, halting taxicab progress through the maelstrom of theatre-bound traffic and reached their seats at the Times Square Theatre over half an hour late. The house was filled with the usual first-night audience of friends of the company, critics, movie stars, society people, chronic first-nighters, men and women about town, and stenographers admitted on complimentary tickets given them by their bosses. It was a well-dressed, lively crowd, and one that was anxious to be very kind to the show. In spite of this, Rodrigo was quite sure by the middle of the first act that the revue wouldn't do. It was doomed to the storehouse, he feared. The girls were of the colorless English type, comparing not at all with the hilariously healthy specimens one found in the American musical comedies. Christy had skimped on the costumes and scenery, both of which items were decidedly second rate. The humor had too Londonish a flavor, and the ideas behind the sketches were banal in the extreme.

However, when Sophie Binner came on quite late in the act, Rodrigo sat up and admitted that the sight of her again gave him decided exhilaration. She was alluring in her costume of pale blue and gold, a costume which exposed the famous Binner legs to full advantage and

without the encumbrance of stockings. The audience liked her also. She was the prettiest woman the footlights had revealed thus far, and she had a pleasing, though not robust voice. Coupled with this was an intimate, sprightly personality that caught on at once. She responded to two encores and finally disappeared amid enthusiastic applause.

Rodrigo turned to comment upon her success to Bill Terhune, and discovered that the Dakotan had fallen fast asleep.

During the intermission, Rodrigo left his somnolent seat-mate and, buttonholing an usher, sent him back-stage with his card. In a few minutes, he followed the card to the dressing room of Sophie, where, in contrast to the noisy confusion outside, he was permitted to gaze upon her gold-and-tinsel liveliness at close range. She was sitting at her dressing-table, a filmy wrap thrown carelessly about the costume she has worn in the first act. Her slim, white body looked very girlish. Her wise, laughing blue eyes welcomed him. With a swift look at the closed door, she invited, "Kiss me, Rodrigo, and say you're glad to see me."

He obeyed, not altogether because it is always polite to accommodate a pretty lady who asks to be kissed. He wanted to kiss her. He would have done it without the invitation. He did it very expertly too. Sophie waved her hatchet-faced English maid out of the room. But that gesture was unnecessary. Rodrigo ex-

plained that he could only stay a minute. He had left the other male member of their contemplated foursome, sleeping. They laughed merrily over that. Sophie said she would be overjoyed to see Bill Terhune again. "I was afraid you were going to bring that sober-faced business partner of yours," she interjected. Rodrigo stiffened a little, but decided that this was neither the time nor the place to start an impassioned defence of John Dorning. The principal thing, he said, was to be sure Sophie and her companion were set for the festivities after the show. They were, she cried. She and Betty Brewster would meet them at the stage door fifteen minutes after the final curtain.

CHAPTER VIII

For an enormous bribe, the head waiter at the Quartier Latin removed the "Reserved" sign from a cozy table very near the dance floor and assisted the two ladies in draping their cloaks about their chairs. The "club" was crowded with the usual midnight-to-dawn merry-makers—brokers, theatrical celebrities, society juveniles of both sexes, sweet sugar daddies and other grades of daddies, bored girls, chattering girls, and plain flappers.

The Quartier Latin, Bill Terhune, awake, loudly proclaimed, was Broadway's latest night club rage. Well protected by the police.

Powdered white cheeks matched laundered white shirt-fronts as their owners "charlestoned" in each other's arms to the nervous, shuffling, muffled rhythm of the world's greatest jazz band. The air was full of talk, laughing, smoke, the discreet popping of corks and the resultant gurgle. The walls of the Quartier Latin were splashed with futurist paintings of stage and screen stars. The Frenchy waitresses wore short velvety black skirts, shiny silk stockings and artists' tams. They carried trays shaped like palettes. The tables were

jammed so close together that one little false move would land one in one's neighbor's lap. Which would probably not have annoyed one's neighbor in the least, such was the spirit of the place. Everybody seemed to be working at top speed to have a good time as quickly as possible. It was rowdy, upsetting, exciting.

With the orchestra in action, one had to almost shout across the table to be heard above the din. Bill Terhune shouted at once to the waitress for glasses and the non-spiritous ingredients of highballs. They arrived, were flavored with libations from Bill's hip, and were consumed with approval. Then they danced, Rodrigo with Sophie and Bill with Betty Brewster. The latter was older than Sophie and much less vivacious and attractive. There were suggestions of hollows in her neck, her hair was that dead blond that comes from an excessive use of artificial coloring, and her eyes had a lack-lustre gleam. She was a typical show-girl who is nearing the declining period of her career. Next year one would find her on the variety stage, the following in a small-time burlesque production, then God knows where. To Rodrigo, there was, at first glance, something a little pathetic about her. He had expected that Sophie would invite a girl somewhat less radiant than herself. It is the habit with beauties to eliminate as much competition as possible of their own sex in their engagements with men.

But Rodrigo had little time to think about Betty. The highball, the disarmingly close presence of Sophie, and the general hilarious laxity of his surroundings were lulling his feelings. Sophie snuggled more closely to him. He breathed the faint, sweet perfume of her hair. The throbbing jungle music beat. The close atmosphere scented with cigarettes and cosmetics, the faces of dancing couples near him smothered thoughts of Dorning and Son. For the time being, he was the old Rodrigo.

"Boy, you can dance," breathed Sophie, slowly disengaging herself from his embrace as the music stopped.

He looked at her. "You're a witch, Sophie, a soft, white witch," he whispered.

They had another round of highballs. Bill Terhune, fast attaining a fighting edge, began abusing the waitress. In his growing quarrelsomeness, he noticed that Betty Brewster was not to be compared in pulchritude to Sophie. He breathed alcoholically upon the latter and demanded with unnecessary preemptoriness that she dance next with him. With a little grimace of annoyance at Rodrigo, she turned smilingly to Bill and acquiesced.

After the next dance, Terhune again produced his enormous flask, whose contents seemed capable of flowing endlessly, like Tennyson's brook. Rodrigo suggested mildly that they had all had enough. But the motion was overruled, three to one. Bill's watery and roving eye caught the

equally itinerant optics of a sleek, dark girl two feet from him, at the next table. She smiled veiledly, and he elaborately offered her a drink.

Rodrigo was not pleased with this by-play. He had been watching the girl's escort, a florid chubby stock-broker type who had also been drinking copiously and who now eyed Bill Terhune with a decidedly disapproving frown. With a defiant toss of her shiny bobbed head at her middle-aged table-mate, the dark girl accepted the glass and bent her ear to hear Bill's blurred invitation to dance that accompanied it. The tom-toms and saxophones commenced their lilting cadence, and Bill's new conquest and Bill arose simultaneously to dance. So did the fat man. He seized Bill's wrist, which was around the girl.

Rodrigo was to his feet in a flash. He knew Bill Terhune. He caught the Dakotan's wrist as, eluding the jealous sugar daddy's grip, it was whipped back and started on its swift devastating journey to the corpulent one's jaw.

"No rough stuff, Bill," Rodrigo cautioned rapidly in a low voice. Bill turned angrily upon his friend, but the Italian held his wrist like a vise. The eyes of all three girls were popping with excitement. They were in the mood to enjoy the sight of embattled males.

"Come on outside and I'll show you how much of a sheik you are," snarled Bill's red-faced antagonist.

Bill was keen to comply, and Rodrigo, wel-

coming the chance at least to transfer the impending brawl to a less conspicuous battleground, loosed him. The two champions set off for the lobby, picking their way unsteadily through the staring dancers, Rodrigo by Bill's side, endeavoring to talk him into a less belligerent mood, hopeless as the task was. Once in the wide open spaces of the lobby, Bill suddenly eluded Rodrigo's arm upon his shoulder, leaped toward his adversary, and smote him cleanly upon the jaw. The fat man crashed against a fantastic wall painting of Gilda Grey and remained huddled quietly where he had landed. All the fight had been knocked out of him by this one sledge-hammer blow. Bill, his honor vindicated, was contented also. All that remained was for Rodrigo to soothe the feelings of the worried manager, who arrived on the run, and two husky bouncers, now standing by to toss the embroiled patrons out upon the sidewalk.

Rodrigo did his task of diplomacy very nicely. The manager cooperated, being anxious to avoid trouble. Cold water was administered to the fallen gladiator. The girl who had caused all the trouble was summoned. Contrite at the sight of her escort's damaged countenance, she readily agreed to take him home, and the two were bundled into a taxicab.

Then the manager turned to Rodrigo and insisted firmly that the other brawler should leave also. He could not afford further dis-

turbances, which might involve the police, however loathe the bluecoats might be to interfere with the licensed Quartier Latin. Bill began to see red all over again at this edict. But there were two husky bouncers at his elbow, and Rodrigo supported the manager. Betty Brewster was paged, and Bill, muttering and defiant to the last, followed in another taxi in the wake of his enemy.

Having banished Bill Terhune to the cool night air, Rodrigo turned to hasten back to Sophie, who, he was afraid, would be furious at him for leaving her sitting alone for such a long time.

"Good evening, Count Torriani," said a melting feminine voice at his elbow. He stopped and turned to confront Mrs. Porter Palmer, who seemed gushingly delighted to see him. He bowed and saw that, accompanying Mrs. Palmer, was a young woman of such striking appearance as to arrest his eye at once and hold it. Jet black hair caught tight to the head set off the waxen pallor of her face. Her dark eyes were slightly almond-shaped and singularly bright. She was dressed in a shimmering black satin evening gown that displayed the graceful lines of her slim, svelte body and the creamy whiteness of her shoulders. She was American, but not in appearance. In Paris and Monte Carlo, Rodrigo had met beauties like this, but never in America. She looked exactly like the type of woman who, in the old

days, had been irresistible to him. But that first swift impression, he told himself, was nonsense. She was probably the soul of modesty.

"I want you to meet my niece, Elise Van Zile," said Mrs. Palmer.

He bent and kissed the glamorous lady's hand and was aware of her languid eyes upon him. A moment later, he was introduced to Mr. Porter Palmer, the twittering bald-headed little man who had been disposing of his ladies' wraps.

"Elise has just come on from San Francisco for a few weeks, and we are showing her the sights," explained Mrs. Palmer, and then to her husband. "It seems terribly crowded and noisy in there, Edward. Do you think it's quite respectable?" Mr. Palmer waved his hands in the air, deprecating his wife's fastidiousness. She turned to Rodrigo, "Won't you join us at our table, Count Torriani?"

"Thanks, really, but the lady I am with and I are just leaving," he made haste to reply, immediately afterward wondering why he had invented this falsehood. He glanced at the coolly beautiful Miss Van Zile, on whom his refusal had apparently made no impression. Was he foolish in sensing, at his very first glimpse of this girl from the West, something that warned him?

"But you will come to the tea I am giving for Elise next Saturday afternoon at the Plaza,

will you not, Count Torriani?" Mrs Palmer insisted.

He hesitated, then accepted. He again kissed the hand of Elise Van Zile, and he raised his eyes to find her looking enigmatically at him. Somehow he was reminded of the Mona Lisa, in whose dark eyes are painted all the wisdom and intrigues of the world.

Rodrigo returned to a petulant Sophie. Both her white elbows were on the table, and she was impatiently fingering the blazing diamond pendant at her throat. It was a magnificent bauble, set in clusters of sapphires and platinum. Her position revealed also her gorgeous diamond bracelets and the large dazzling assortment of rings upon her fingers. Sophie was an assiduous collector of jewelry, and, in the absence of something more interesting to do, she was offering an exhibition of her arsenal to the crowd about her.

"Where have you been, Rodrigo?" she fretted as he sat down. "At least you might have come back as soon as you made Betty leave me. I have felt a perfect fool—sitting here alone, with everybody in the place staring at me."

He apologized profusely. She was right. People were staring at her. He stared back so intently at the two young men with too-slicked hair and ill-fitting evening clothes who had taken the table vacated by Bill Terhune's antagonist, that they dropped their bold eyes.

"In that case," he answered her complaint, "let's leave. We can go to some other place."

"I've a very pretty little apartment on the Drive," she suggested demurely.

In the shadowy depths of the taxi tonneau a few moments later, she made herself comfortable against his shoulder. It was long after midnight. Save for machines bound on errands similar to theirs, the streets were deserted. The car sped westward toward the river. Sophie broke a long silence by murmuring, "You write the most wonderful letters, Rodrigo. I've saved them all. Though I don't suppose you mean a word you say in them."

Rodrigo laughed contentedly. Close to him thus, Sophie was again stirring his senses.

"Do you love me, Rodrigo—more than you ever did in London?" she asked suddenly.

"You are lovelier than you ever were in London, Sophie," he quibbled. "You are the loveliest girl I have ever known." But the image of Elise Van Zile obtruded itself and rather spoiled this bit of flattery.

The cab drew up to the curb in front of a huge marble vault of an apartment house. He paid the driver, helped her out of the taxi, and then held open the massive outer door of the apartment house, which was unlocked. Inside the ornate hall, with its fresco work and potted palms, he made a half-hearted movement to bid her good-night, but she insisted that he come up to her apartment. In a chair behind

the private telephone switchboard a thin negro youth slept peacefully, his woolly head resting in his arms in the space in front of the plugs. Sophie explained that he was also the night elevator boy, and Rodrigo walked over and started to arouse him. At almost the same instant the front door swung gently open, and a voice said sharply, "Stick 'em up!"

Sophie choked a scream. Rodrigo whirled around to face a thin barrel of cold steel. He slowly raised his hands aloft and looked beyond the revolver into a pair of ratty eyes showing above a somewhat soiled white handkerchief concealing nose and mouth. The man with the gun wore a dinner jacket and a much crumpled gray fedora. Rodrigo thought he recognized him as one of the sinister-looking young men who had been eyeing Sophie's jewels in the night club. He heard faintly the purring of an automobile at the curb outside. No doubt the fellow's accomplice was waiting there. Rodrigo's eyes shifted rapidly around for a possible solution of his uncomfortable situation. He stealthily lowered his hands.

"Stick 'em up and keep 'em there!" snarled the intruder more sharply than before. Behind the telephone switchboard there was a sudden commotion. The burglar's words had aroused the sleeping negro. The latter took one horrified look, his face turned ashen, and he dropped abruptly and clumsily at full length on the floor out of range of the pistol. The

stick-up man's head made the mistake of jerking for a flash toward this unexpected noise. Seizing his chance, Rodrigo leaped at the bandit with all his force, sent him reeling to the floor, and grabbed at the gun. The weapon bounded crazily to the marble-inlaid floor. Both men dived for the gun at once, Rodrigo ahead by the fraction of a second. He sprang to his feet, followed by his assailant. But before Rodrigo could get a commanding hold upon the trigger, the fellow had bounded out of the open door. A roaring motor, a sharp grinding of gears, and the car sped away. Rodrigo bareheaded, upon the sidewalk, deemed it wise to withhold his shot.

Sophie was white and trembling as if with a chill when he came back to her. The negro elevator boy was standing beside his switchboard like a man who has seen ghosts.

Rodrigo clasped an arm about Sophie's shoulder and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered, and he wondered if she were really as frightened as she pretended, "but you mustn't leave me. Take me up to my apartment."

He motioned the negro into the elevator and, after some hesitation, the latter slid the mahogany gate open and stood at the lever of the car. At the door of her apartment, Sophie had recovered sufficiently to rummage a key from her handbag. They stepped inside. She switched on the light.

He at once offered a tentative, "Well, my dear, I guess everything is all right now. And I'll say good-night."

She came closer to him and protested, "No —I am still frightened to death. You musn't leave me here. Those awful men will come back, I know they will."

"Nonsense," he said promptly, "they're more frightened than you are. What we should do is to notify the police."

"Oh, no," she cried. "Christy detests that sort of publicity for anyone in his shows. And it would be bad for you too as a business man."

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed. Then after some hesitation, "I really am going now."

He had anticipated her next move. As she came to him and started to put her arms about him, he gently disengaged them. She stepped back, stared at him and cried, "Oh, you are impossible! You have treated me positively shamefully to-night—leaving me to fight and now refusing to protect me. I think you are contemptible." Flashes of the well-known Binnerian temper were showing themselves.

Rodrigo shrugged his shoulders and smiled, "That's nonsense, my dear. Go to bed and forget it."

And before she could either protest or berate him further, he opened the door, stepped swiftly out, and closed it behind him. He rang for the elevator. When, after five minutes of waiting,

there was no sign of response, he walked down the stairs to the street. The negro elevator boy was not on duty at his post, and Rodrigo wondered idly if the Ethiopian had fled from the place in fear of a repetition of the hold-up.

Walking out to Broadway, Rodrigo hailed a taxi and was soon being whirled swiftly in the gray awakening dawn down-town toward his own apartment. His first adventure upon Broadway since his arrival in America had not been a success, he told himself. It had resulted in Bill Terhune making a fool of himself and in Sophie becoming enraged at him again, However, it was just as well another break had come with Sophie. The sort of thing she represented had no thrill for him any more, he was now quite sure. He was quite contented to be a staid partner in Dorning and Son. Already business problems, speculations as to the success of John in his Philadelphia negotiations and what it meant to the firm, were filling his drowsy head. There was a momentary flash into his brain of the exotic face of Elise Van Zile, and then he slumped in the tobacco-smelling taxi seat. His chin drooped, and he was quite asleep.

The driver had to shake him lustily in order to awaken him when the car drew up in front of the Park Avenue apartment house.

CHAPTER IX

Elise Van Zile owed her dark beauty to her Spanish mother. Her olive skin, her smouldering black eyes, her slim, svelte body whose liquid grace made the fact that she was a little taller than the average woman an added charm rather than a defect, Elise had inherited from Elisa Alvarez.

Mrs. Porter Palmer was a Van Zile, and garrulously proud of the fact. Descended from the early Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, her family had been for over three hundred years numbered among the social élite of the city. But there was also a Pacific Coast branch of the Van Ziles, as Mrs. Palmer, when she exhausted her account of the Manhattan constituency, was wont to relate. Derrick Van Zile had sailed in a clipper ship in 1849 to seek his fortune in the golden hills of California. Moreover, unlike thousands of his fellow argonauts, he had found it. The hoard of gold dust he had passed along to his son had been sufficient to enable the latter to abandon the valley of the Sacramento and journey to the town at its mouth, San Francisco. There Johann Van Zile had established a shipping business, running a fleet of swift

American sailing vessels to the Orient and adding considerably to the family fortune. The grandson of Johann Van Zile had been eventually handed both the name and the business.

Though not distinguished by either the bold, adventure-seeking temperament of Derrick or the shrewd business sense of his grandfather, the present John Van Zile, father of Elise, was acute enough in his choice of subordinates and hence succeeded very nicely at managing an enterprise that by this time was extensive enough to manage itself. In one respect, John III had excelled both Derrick and Johann as well as the John who had been his own father. He had united himself in marriage to a fair daughter of the original Spanish aristocracy of California.

True, Elisa Alvarez had had very little to say in the matter. It had been an arrangement between her father and the awkward, loosely built young American, who, without perceptibly ever exerting himself, seemed to have an uncanny ability to get what he wanted. John Van Zile had met the pretty senorita and her aggressively protective father and his bristling moustachios during a voyage on one of his own ships to Mexico and return. The Avalarez' had been visiting relatives. They were Castillian-born, and proud and reserved, as is the habit of their caste. Becoming acquainted with the dark young lady, who had, almost at first glance, won his heart, had not been easy for

Van Zile. In fact, not until Senor Alvarez had learned definitely that this was *the* rich shipping magnate, Van Zile, had the matter been arranged. After that the road had been smoothed. Senor Alvarez had lineage, but was in impecunious circumstances. Mr. Van Zile would make a settlement upon the consummation of the marriage. It was agreed.

Elise Van Zile seemed quite contented with her union. She had never been moved to any deep love for her husband. But he treated her well, and she rendered him wifely devotion. What deep thoughts lurked behind those dark, smouldering eyes and within that Spanish heart were locked with her in her grave when she quietly passed on at the birth of her only child, a daughter. The mother's name was French—Americanized into Elise, and the child was placed in the hands of a corps of nurses, housekeepers, and governesses.

Spanish girls mature early, and Elise Van Zile had from the first appeared to be compounded more of Spanish blood than of American. At fifteen she was a woman. At twenty she was a fully developed lady of the world, in whom the wisdom of two races seemed to have blended. She was a favorite in San Francisco society, a wonderfully attractive creature, as many a smitten gallant of the Bay City had eagerly told her, after at last venturing to brave the dignified Castilian reserve that formed a cool protective barrier around Elise's colorful

personality. She had permitted not one of these swains to touch her heart, to arouse the capacity for love concealed within her. So far her emotional life had been confined to mild flirtations as uninteresting as the daily social round.

For months, in San Francisco, Elise had lately been assailed by a restlessness that had shaken her out of her usual calm. Her life had become a monotonous routine, stale and unprofitable. She longed for new surroundings. Her father had been irritating her, moreover, by his hints that it was time she married. In vain she had replied to him, "But none of these men appeal to me. They are mere boys." John Van Zile, growing steadily older, was anxious for an heir to whom he might hand over his business. Having been deprived by the death of his wife of the chance for a direct heir and having no inclination to marry again, he considered a grandson the next possibility.

Under the circumstances, the invitation of Mrs. Porter Palmer to her niece to spend the spring in New York with her had arrived at an opportune time. Elise was eager for the new scene. Her father had indicated that her aunt would introduce her to a horde of new rich, eligible men. It was quite possible that one of them would appeal to her as being this paragon whom her fastidious tastes had evidently set upon. Elise agreed. It was not beyond the realms of the imagination, she con-

ceded, that she might return to San Francisco engaged.

To herself she had speculated as to whether or not she would ever return to San Francisco at all. She and her father had no deep love for each other, had never understood each other. She wanted to taste life in New York. Later, perhaps, she would find an excuse to go abroad, to Paris, to Spain, where among her mother's relatives she might lead a more romantic existence than with the stolid Van Ziles. She was quite willing to embark upon marriage, provided it was not at the sacrifice of the luxuries which she now enjoyed. In France or Spain perhaps she might encounter a man with the right combination of romantic attraction and money.

An hour before the tea which her aunt was giving in her honor, Elise sat in front of the dressing-table in the sunny, exquisitely furnished boudoir that formed part of the suite her aunt had placed at her disposal. She was polishing her nails, and thinking of Count Rodrigo Torriani.

She was asking herself if she had, indeed, met at last a man worthy of her steel. At that first unexpected meeting with him in the lobby of the Quartier Latin, she knew that she was gazing upon a personage of far more interesting potentialities than any other male of her acquaintance. His good looks, his aristocratic bearing, the bold manner in which he had swept her with

his dark eyes, had struck a responsive chord within her. Here was a man whom she admitted that, under propitious circumstances, she could love. Here was the potential vis-a-vis of her sought-for emotional experience. If he were rich, and he had every appearance of being well-to-do, she might even marry him.

It never occurred to Elise Van Zile that she could not do with any man as she wished. And, indeed, there was little reason why it should have occurred to her, men being what they are.

And so she was looking forward with distinct pleasure to seeing Count Torriani again, and she was making certain that he would be even more thoroughly attracted by her striking appearance than he had been on the occasion of their only previous meeting.

Three-quarters of an hour later, Elise stood with her aunt in the reception hall below as the first of the guests arrived. They were for the most part fussy, inconsequential people, friends of her aunt's, older than Elise and uninteresting to her, though she bestowed upon them a calm, gracious greeting that served very satisfactorily.

By the time Rodrigo arrived, immaculate in afternoon attire, the room was comfortably filled by the chatterers.

Rodrigo gravely kissed the hand of his hostess and her guest of honor, making the ceremony of briefer duration in the case of the latter than with Mrs. Palmer. He speculated

uneasily if there was something a little mocking in the smile with which Miss Van Zile swept him from under her long lashes.

"Haven't you brought John Dorning along with you?" chided Mrs. Palmer.

"John was detained momentarily," Rodrigo explained. "Do you, by any chance, recall Mark Rosner, a former associate of Dorning and Son?"

The elderly lady pursed her white lips. "He was the nervous one, was he not? Always excited about something?"

"Yes. As you probably read in the papers this morning, he's had the nervous shock of his life. Thieves broke in last night and stole a black and ruby Huin Ysin vase he was exhibiting for a customer in the window of his shop."

"Oh, really! A genuine Huin Ysin?"

"It was worth eight thousand dollars. Rosner was aware that we have what is undoubtedly the only duplicate of it in America. He is practically forced to buy it from us, and John was arranging the purchase. You can rest assured, of course, that good old John won't take advantage of the chap's hard luck. But you mustn't let me bore you with business." The apology was addressed to Elise Van Zile. He knew that, as far as Mrs. Porter Palmer was concerned, he could talk antiques and the prices of them the rest of the afternoon. It was her only enjoyable diversion.

He moved nearer to Elise, and, since it was

evident that he would be the last to arrive at the tea, she moved over with him a few moments later to twin chairs out of the beaten path of the other guests.

"You take a very deep interest in your business?" she remarked languidly, and again there was that slightly mocking note.

"I really do," he answered promptly. "I have never been so happy in my life as I have since my arrival in America and my association with Dorning and Son."

"How interesting. Then you have not always been a business man?"

He suspected that Elise had learned the full details of his past from her aunt, who, being of an obviously inquiring nature, had doubtlessly by this time fully informed herself concerning him. He judged that she was merely feeling him out. It made him uneasy. But he answered, "In my own country, it is considered, for some reason, not quite *au fait* for a gentleman to engage in honest toil. Though my father was in trade, and no finer gentleman ever lived. Over here it is the reverse. One is not judged to have amounted to anything unless he is, or has been, a business man."

"More's the pity." She said it with more than necessary vehemence.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I believe this perpetual preoccupation in business has ruined the American man for anything else. He does not have time

to play until he has made his fortune, and then he is too old to learn. He knows nothing of art, literature, or the finer things of life, and he cares less. He takes his pleasure in short, mad doses, as the business men were taking it at that bedlam of a supper club at which we met you the other night. One should take pleasure slowly, as one drinks liqueurs. One should take time to live. Don't you think so?"

"Of course." He had hardly listened, so intent was he upon looking at her.

The lazy eyes of Elise were glowing now. The butler, arriving with the tea things, interrupted their conversation. Rodrigo found the pause rather welcome. It broke for the moment the spell which her personality was weaving around him. Facing her thus, alone, she seemed as out of place in this staid gathering of old women of both sexes as Cleopatra in a sewing-circle. For here was a woman, he recognized, who possessed magnetic appeal. She had no interest in art or literature, despite her profession of concern for them. She was supremely self-indulgent, he judged, thrill-seeking, eager for something that would wake her sated and very beautiful self to life. Instinctively his pulse quickened as he looked at her, felt the magnetic tug of her. For him, he knew, she would be profoundly disturbing, much more disturbing than Sophia Binner or Rosa. In her beat the blood of Madame Du Barry, Manon Lescaut, though she would never

lose her head for love. She would always keep her head. She would reserve the losing of heads to her victims.

And yet she fascinated him. Already he was wishing that the other guests would miraculously disappear. Already he was planning when he could see her again.

"Your indictment of American business, coming from an American woman, surprises me. I understood that American women were their husbands' chief inspirations in the making of money," he endeavored to put discussion upon a lighter plane.

"American wives want money to spend. That is why they urge their husbands to make it. They drive the poor fellows like muleteers. And if the business man has no wife to drive him, it is some other woman not so respectable but none the less desirous of jewels and a limousine. American women dominate their men absolutely. The husbands haven't a chance. You see, I can speak freely because I am half Spanish, and in most ways a great deal more than half. I am a Latin, like you. That is why it seemes strange to me that you should wish to attach yourself to the grindstone of American business."

It did not seem to be the right occasion on which to enlighten her by stating that he was in business in order to make a living.

"And what are we Latins fitted for, then?" he asked lightly.

Her dark eyes were fixed upon him and her voice softened, "For life, pleasure—love."

For a moment his shadowy eyes narrowed and seemed to grow even darker as he returned her look. Then he shook his long body, as if to throw off the disturbing influence, and he tried to say matter-of-factly, "But our business is not so sordid as you seem to think. It is as much art as it is commerce. I want you to meet my associate and dear friend, John Dorning, Miss Van Zile. The very sight of him would convince you that Dorning and Son is no money-factory. I tell you—come with your aunt to tea with us at our apartment. You will enjoy seeing our little private art collection, and you will meet one of the best chaps in the world." He arose and wondered uneasily if he were making a respectable adieu. This woman confused him so. He tried to persuade himself that the invitation he had just uttered was merely a device for smoothing over his intended abrupt departure. But his conscience whispered he was scheming to see her again.

"I should be delighted," she smiled, and rose also. Together they sought Mrs. Palmer, detached her from the group she was beguiling with gossip, and Elise said, "Count Torriani has invited us to tea at his apartment, Aunt Helen." She turned to Rodrigo. "What was the day you mentioned, Count Torriani?"

"Why—Thursday. Yes, Thursday will be excellent. John will be there, Mrs. Palmer, and

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

NO MAN HAD GUESSED WHAT FIRE LAY WITHIN ELISE'S COOL BODY.

he will make his excuses to you in person."

"You may tell him I shall expect a very abject apology," fussed Mrs. Palmer, and really meant it, for she disliked having people take her invitations lightly.

"I'm sure he would have been here this afternoon if he possibly could," Rodrigo insisted. He bade them both good-bye, adding, "At four on next Thursday then."

Outside the sun had been driven under cover by gray clouds. The bright May afternoon had turned raw and a brisk wind whipped up Fifth Avenue. Rodrigo greeted the penetrating cold with pleasure. He set off on foot down the sidewalk, alongside the tumultuous sea of homegoing motors and omnibuses, at a rapid pace. He had the feeling of having escaped from a close, perfumed atmosphere fraught with peril. He tried to laugh at himself for styling Mrs. Porter Palmer's party thus. It was Elise Van Zile who had changed the atmosphere. He needed a refreshing in the late afternoon open air.

When he reached the austere entrance to Dorning and Son he paused and went in, though it was nearly six o'clock. He opened the door to John's office and found it empty. From the open door of Mary Drake's alcove came the sound of a typewriter, and he strode to her doorway. She greeted him in a friendly fashion. Indeed Rodrigo, if he had been looking for it, might have caught something more

than friendship in her shy, pleased acknowledgment of his unexpected presence. He sank down with a sigh in the chair beside her desk, transferred his hat and stick to the clothes-tree, and lighted a cigarette.

It had suddenly occurred to him that it was very pleasant indeed sitting here alone resting with Mary Drake—Mary, who was just as beautiful as Elise, though in a far different way; wholesome, efficient, good pal Mary.

"Where's John?" he asked.

"He went away with Mr. Rosner. He said he probably wouldn't be back this afternoon.

"Did they come to terms about the vase?"

"Yes, John sold it to him for five thousand dollars which is three thousand dollars less than it is worth, as you know. But that's John for you. Poor Mr. Rosner was half-crazy with anxiety. It seems this man who owned the other vase is a Tartar to deal with. He insisted upon full restitution for the theft, and Mr. Rosner did not have a cent of insurance. In a way, Rodrigo, it would have been a Godsend if John hadn't sold him the vase."

"Mary, I didn't realize you were so hard-hearted," Rodrigo bantered.

"Well, if Mr. Rosner couldn't have replaced the stolen property, he would have had to go out of business, I guess. And that would have been the best thing in the world for him. I visited his shop the other noon, Rodrigo, and it is a mess. He will never succeed. The shop is

too small, dark and unprepossessing. His choice of stock has been abominable—a lot of shoddy originals that nobody wants to buy, mixed in with palpable fakes that wouldn't deceive the most ignorant amateur collector. And Mr. Rosner is an irritating, stubborn person, the worst possible type of salesman in this business."

"But he must be making some money, if he can pay five thousand dollars cash on short notice."

"He didn't pay for it. John has taken him around to Mr. Bates, the lawyer, and is having a note drawn up for the amount. Probably he will never collect it."

A silence followed, broken as Mary resumed her typing. Rodrigo watched her deft fingers as they twinkled over the keys, and later as she signed the letter with Dorning's name, sealed it, and placed it in its envelope. Then, with a little tired sigh, she started clearing her desk of papers, preparatory to leaving. But he did not want her to leave him. There was such cool comfort in having Mary near him. He suddenly told himself quite calmly that this thing that he had been increasingly feeling for Mary was the real wholesome kind of love that a man feels for the woman he marries and wants for her soul rather than for her beauty, the kind of love that he had never had for any woman before. Since he knew that to tell her of it now would spoil everything, he merely said,

"You work too hard, Mary. You ought to have more fun. Why don't you telephone your mother that you are stopping in town for dinner with me to-night? Then we will go to some quiet place to eat, and a show later, and I'll get you home before midnight."

He realized with surprise that he was trembling with anxiety like a schoolboy who has invited a girl to his first dance.

Mary, who had risen to get her hat, turned and peered at him with a look in which there was shy pleasure. He had never since that fatal mistake on his first day there, approached her socially before. "It would be fun," she said. "And it happens that mother wouldn't be left alone. My aunt is staying with us. I'll see."

She called a number in Brooklyn and spoke tenderly to her mother. She hung up the receiver slowly, turned and said to him, "Mother is willing. Go out for a few minutes while I give a few dabs to my hair."

CHAPTER X

They dined at a little French restaurant just off Madison Avenue. In this quiet atmosphere of good food, simple furnishings and honest citizens and their wives and sweethearts, with Mary pleased and very pretty opposite him, Elise Van Zile fled very far into the distance. Rodrigo had banned all talk of business for the evening. He wanted Mary to tell him about herself, he said. This violated a little the embargo against shop talk, for Mary's interests it developed, lay almost wholly in her mother's welfare and in schooling herself for an executive position with Dorning and Son. She expressed regret that she had never had the opportunity to travel abroad and visit the great art centers of Europe. She seemed to believe that Rodrigo's career, before joining Dorning and Son, had consisted of a rigid course of training and later of travel with art battling with occasional ladies in the foreground. He gently drew the conversation around to a more personal basis. Almost pathetically anxious to make a good impression upon her, he yet gently wished to disillusion her regarding his past. Any other course would not be honorable. For some day soon he hoped to tell her that he loved her.

They saw a very sprightly musical comedy

together, a gay little show in which a brother-and-sister dancing pair, who were the ruling rage of the town, starred and gave an exhibition of spontaneous vivacity and grace such as one seldom sees behind the footlights. The whole entertainment was keyed to their joyous pitch, and, though the other performances fell somewhat short of the pace set for them, the impression left with the audience at the final curtain was such that a congenial warmth seemed to envelop the outgoing throngs.

Rodrigo wisely did not suggest further tarrying amid the Broadway lights, and, starting their long taxi ride back to Brooklyn, both Mary and he were very cheerful and feeling very kindly indeed toward each other and the world. And yet he did not make love to her, though she sat as close to him as had Sophie Binner in a similar taxi. There was a light in Mary's eye as she turned to him that he was almost awed to see. As they drew up to her door, he told himself, with thumping heart, that she would not resent it if he kissed her. Yet he helped her from the taxi with almost too much politeness and stood at the door of her rather antiquated brownstone house as she slipped in her key.

"I would invite you in to meet my mother, Rodrigo," she said, "but she is probably asleep. You will come some other time?"

"I would like to, Mary, very much," he replied.

He shook her hand and held it while she thanked him for a very nice time. Then he turned, the door closed, and she was gone.

During the next few days he made no effort to press the advantage he had won in establishing their relations upon a more personal basis. Mary would not like him to, he knew, and he was desperately anxious not to offend her. The affairs of Dorning and Son took him continually into her presence, and he sensed a change in her attitude toward him which she could not conceal. It made him very happy.

On Wednesday of that week, which was the first of June, a matter of vast importance to Rodrigo, a matter of genuine pleasure to both himself and the whole personnel of Dorning and Son, reached its consummation. Rodrigo was made a partner in the firm.

Henry Dorning broke his long confinement at Greenwich by making the trip into New York for the occasion. The papers had been drawn up by Emerson Bates, and the meeting was held in the lawyer's offices, a many-doored domain of thick carpets, glass-topped desks, soft-footed clerks, and vast arsenals of thick books. It was a dignified, congenial ceremony, having seemed to Rodrigo to have the effect of being received into an ancient and honorable order, of becoming a part of the Dorning family, as well as receiving stock in a very lucrative business.

Henry Dorning, looking thinner and whiter

than Rodrigo had ever remembered him, but happy and keen-witted, signed the papers and shook hands with his new partner.

"I know you are going to be an even greater asset to Dorning and Son than ever now—in more ways than one," he said, and Rodrigo wondered if the significance of his remark lay in the promise made to broaden John Dorning. Well, there was the tea to Elise Van Zile and her aunt to-morrow. John had promised to be there. Rodrigo had been trying not to look forward to that occasion.

Later in the day, Henry Madison, gray-haired manager of Dorning and Son, whom Rodrigo had learned to respect for his vast knowledge of his job, sought out the new member of the firm, congratulated him, and said cordially, "I am mighty glad about this, Rodrigo. I confess now I was a bit dubious about you when you first came here. Damned narrow-mindedness, that's all. I've long since changed my mind, and I don't know of a man I'd rather be working for than you."

"And I don't know of anybody I'd rather have say those nice things to me than you, Mr. Madison," Rodrigo replied. This was not quite true, for a few minutes previously he had been congratulated by Mary Drake.

The next afternoon he reluctantly left an accumulation of work to fly up to the apartment and supervise for the last few minutes the efforts of Mrs. Brink, the housekeeper who

worked part-time for John and him, to prepare the place and the collation for the tea to Elise Van Zile and her aunt. John had promised to come up within the next half hour. Mrs. Brink, having arranged things to his satisfaction, left, and Rodrigo had just completed a change in attire when the telephone rang.

Mrs. Palmer's voice came over the wire. "Dear Count Torriani," she almost quavered, "I have never felt so mortified and so sorry. I should never have accepted your engagement for tea this afternoon. It completely slipped my mind at the time that it was the date of the Wounded Soldiers' Bridge and Bazaar at the Plaza. And—will you ever forgive me?—I quite lost track of my engagement at your apartment until just this minute. I am chairman of one of the Bazaar committees, you see. And here I am at the Plaza, and, really, it would be impossible to get away. Will you have mercy, dear Count Torriani, and forgive me and invite me some other time?" The poor old lady seemed on the verge of bursting into tears.

A great load was lifting from Rodrigo's mind, and he had difficulty in restraining the relief in his voice. "Certainly, Mrs. Palmer. Don't worry in the least. I shall miss the pleasure of your company, and that of your niece, but we can easily make it some other time. Don't put yourself to any inconvenience by leaving your friends. I am not annoyed in the slightest."

He hung up the receiver and smiled into the mirror above the telephone. The smile departed as the apartment bell rang. But then he thought it must be John, who had doubtless mislaid his key. Rodrigo walked over to the door and opened it.

"Am I late?" smiled Elise Van Zile, very beautiful and calm on the threshold. "Has my aunt arrived yet?"

Rodrigo, concealing his feelings, bowed her in politely. "Please come in. Mrs. Palmer hasn't come yet." He was puzzled, and both happy and annoyed to see her.

When he had closed the door, she turned her dark face to him and gave a short laugh of defiant geniality. "What is the use of pretending? I have just come from the Plaza. I left my aunt as she was going to telephone you that she wasn't coming. But the Bazaar is a frightful bore, and I wasn't to be cheated out of my engagement with—your art treasures. If you are displeased or shocked, please send me away at once. But you aren't, are you?"

"Of course not," he replied almost too promptly. "Won't you sit down?" She sank into John's favorite chair, and Rodrigo took a seat away from her. Her quick eyes understood the precaution, and a small, mocking glint beamed for a moment in their cool depths.

"Oh, please don't be so terribly polite with me," she chaffed. "It doesn't become a man like you, and I don't especially fancy it." She

turned idly to a painting over the mantelpiece. "I see you have the sign of your avocation continually before you."

His eyes followed hers. "You mean the prize fight? It is an original by George Bellows, one of your few real American artists. Poor chap, he died in his prime. But why my 'avocation'?"

"When I first met you—at the night club—you had just knocked some poor person sprawling, if I remember rightly."

Rodrigo blushed.

She added significantly. "That is what first interested me in you. I might otherwise consider you merely the usual *effete* foreign titled gentleman. I adore strong men. I especially adore prize fights and attend them whenever I have the chance." She leaned back challengingly. "Now tell me that I am bold and and unfeminine."

"I think you're quite wonderful," he said with sudden emphasis, and moved to a chair nearer to her. She leaned closer. Her mask-like face softened, and she laid her thin, graceful fingers upon his chair. She showed no signs of displeasure as he laid his hand upon hers.

She had succeeded in moving him again. She knew now that she could mold him to her wish, but she did not wish to do so quite yet. So she professed to ignore his pressure upon her hand, and commented, "This is an adorable place.

You must be frightfully rich, if you will pardon my vulgarity in mentioning it."

"I'm not rich," he said. "The place is Dorning's."

"Really?" She shot a quick glance at him and, involuntarily, made a motion to withdraw her hand. "But the car outside is yours. I have seen you driving it."

"That is Dorning's too." Her evident interest in this question of money cooled his ardor somewhat, drew him back toward earth. He said plainly, "Dorning has a couple of millions in his own name, but I haven't a nickel, except what I earn by working hard every day."

She arose thoughtfully after a moment. As he rose to his feet also, she swept him with admiring eyes. But her attitude had subtly changed. She had ceased to wish him to make love to her.

"Your friend, Mr. Dorning—is he married?" she asked carelessly.

"No. He takes little interest in girls." She accepted a cigarette, and he held the match for her. Lighting his own, he wondered swiftly if such a glamorous lady would consider the quiet John Dorning worth trying her charms upon. "I am expecting Mr. Dorning here at any moment," he offered. It would be more amusing than anything else to see her focus her alluring artillery upon his friend, he decided. He had every confidence that she would find John impregnable.

"I shall be interested to meet a New York millionaire who is not interested in girls," she said. Was there a challenge in her remark? Rodrigo wondered. He was still considering the question when John Dorning turned the key and walked hurriedly into the room, stopping at the sight of the visitor.

Rodrigo introduced them.

"I had expected to meet my aunt, Mrs. Palmer, here, but she has not arrived," Elise explained. "Of course I am leaving at once. I was just saying good-bye to Count Torriani."

Astonishment and a tribute to her cleverness were written upon Rodrigo's face. Her whole voice and manner had changed suddenly from those of a virile sophisticated woman to a demure clinging vine, humbly asking John not to misunderstand her. And she was boldly counting upon Rodrigo for an ally. She was a superb actress. For the first time since their acquaintance, Rodrigo saw John Dorning's face light up with interest toward a woman other than his sister or Mary Drake.

"I've just been admiring your perfectly wonderful place," she said naïvely to John, flattering admiration in her eyes. "You have furnished it so exquisitely. I am such a novice in the arts. You must let me come to your galleries some day and have you enlighten me."

To Rodrigo there was something uncanny and alarming in the way John hung upon her words,

stared at her. It was as if she had a different method for fascinating every man she met, as if she had instinctively sensed what no woman had hitherto discovered—a way to interest John Dorning.

"I'd be tickled to death to have you visit our shop," Dorning floundered.

"I've been fascinated by what Count Torriani has told me about it," she smiled gravely. "And I'm especially interested to meet the owner of it all. And now, really, I must go."

"My car is outside," Dorning offered eagerly. "I—that is, Rodrigo—will drive you home."

"Don't bother, please, either of you," she replied. "I'd be frightened to ride with Count Torriani. He flashed by me the other day so rapidly that he did not see me at all."

This, Rodrigo knew, was a prevarication. He had not driven a car in any park anywhere since Elise Van Zile's arrival in New York.

"I know," Dorning laughed. "He does drive like a comet. But—er—I'm a regular snail at the wheel. If Rodrigo doesn't mind——"

"He doesn't," Rodrigo cut in rather sullenly.

John turned eagerly toward her, and she said gayly, "Very well, Mr. Dorning, and you may drive just as slowly and carefully as you know how."

"Fine," returned John. "We'll take a turn

in the park on the way. It's a wonderful afternoon." He hurried to open the door for her.

"Good afternoon, Count Torriani, the tea was delicious," she said suavely, dark, ironic eyes upon his grave face. He glanced at the undisturbed tea things upon the little taboret, shrugged his shoulders, and bent over her hand. Vexed as he was with her, he could not kiss her hand without feeling a little emotion within him.

He watched her disappear into the hall. To John Dorning, following her, he called suddenly, "John, you'll need your hat, won't you?" John shamefacedly returned for it. Rodrigo handed it to him with a smile.

Rodrigo sank down into a comfortable chair, lighted a cigarette, and thoughtfully poured himself a cup of the neglected tea.

It was an hour later that John returned, flushed by the wind and something that had nothing to do with the elements. Rodrigo was still in the chair, trying to read.

"You didn't mind my running off with Miss Van Zile?" John asked, with a strange indication in his voice that he didn't care whether his friend minded or not. He was excited, eager to confide.

"Not at all," returned Rodrigo, "but John——"

John had lighted a cigarette and was walking around the room. "She's wonderful, isn't she,

Rodrigo?" he said suddenly. "A very remarkable and very beautiful girl. She's never been to New York before, she says. She's frightened with the city, but eager to see the sights. I've made several engagements with her to show them to her."

Rodrigo was silent.

John enthused on. "Rodrigo, if I fell in love, it would be with that kind of a girl—frank, unspoiled, sweet and lovely. She has something Eastern women utterly lack. They are all so sophisticated and blasé. You could never imagine such a woman marrying me for my money, for instance."

Rodrigo wondered if he was a coward. He ought to warn John that he was playing with dynamite, that this girl was everything that his friend thought she was not. But John was so utterly absorbed in her. And he, Rodrigo, had promised Henry Dorning to show his son something of worldly women. Here was John's opportunity to secure an education. Probably with no serious results. Elise must be playing with Dorning, and it couldn't last. She could have no serious intentions toward John. He was exactly the opposite of the type of man that interested her. Rodrigo, with no sense of self-flattery, even suspected shrewdly that she had played up to John with the object of making John's room-mate jealous.

And so, he decided, for the time being, that he would keep silent.

CHAPTER XI

Rodrigo attended a private auction of Flemish art the next morning and did not reach the office until noon-time. Having glanced through his mail, he thrust his head into John's office to tell him of the purchases he had made. He was quite well pleased with himself and was looking forward to Dorning's commendation on his bargains. Mary Drake was alone in the office.

"Good-morning, Mary," called Rodrigo. "Has John gone to lunch already?"

He saw with a little uneasiness that something of the usual warmth with which she greeted him had fled from her eyes and voice. "Yes, he is lunching with a Miss Van Zile at the Plaza."

Rodrigo frowned. His high spirits were somewhat quenched. He entered and walked over toward Mary and sat down. He looked at her a moment, hesitated, then said abruptly, "Mary, if your best girl friend was attracted to a chap who you knew was no good, what would you do about it?"

She regarded him seriously and said rather pertly, "I would make very sure first that my

opinion of the man's unworthiness was correct."

"And if you had made sure—then what?"

She gave a little helpless gesture. She was so serious that he was on the point of asking her what was troubling her. "How can you make sure?" she asked gravely. And went on, "I used to think that first impressions of people were instinctively the right ones. That everything after that just had the effect of clouding things, of leading to wrong judgments. Recently I changed my mind. I decided that what a person has been in the past has nothing to do with the present. I thought people could change, could find themselves, and become new men—or women. Now—I don't know."

He tried to take her delicate, white hand, but it eluded his. "Mary," he asked softly, "are you thinking of me when you say these things about—first opinions?"

He took her troubled silence for an affirmation.

"Has someone been talking to you since about me?" he queried intuitively.

Mary, who was never one for groping about in the dark, replied, "A girl by the name of Sophie Binner was in this morning. She asked for you. When she found you weren't here, she grew quite loud and troublesome, and Mr. Madison referred her to John. I couldn't help but hear some of the conversation between them,

though I left when I discovered its private nature."

"Sophie Binner?" he repeated, screwing his forehead into a frown. "But I haven't seen her for several months. She is an actress I knew in England—and, for a short time, here. But she has been on the road with her company, and I haven't even written to her."

"You must have written to her some time or other."

"Why, what do you mean, Mary?" He had never seen the usually calm and capable Mary agitated so. It agitated him in turn. Sophie was not above making trouble, he knew, especially after the unfriendly manner of their last parting.

"I don't want you to question me any further, Rodrigo," said Mary nervously. "I have told you quite all I know. You will have to get the rest from John. Probably he won't mention it to you. He hates trouble of all kinds—particlularly sordid troubles—and he will be anxious to shield you. And I think you shouldn't allow yourself to be shielded, in this case."

"Certainly not. I'll ask him what happened at once."

But Rodrigo did not have the opportunity to broach the subject of Sophie to his partner during the remainder of the day. John did not return from his luncheon engagement until after three, when he hurried in breezily, a carnation

in his buttonhole and a flush upon his face that caused the employees out in the gallery to look significantly at each other and smile approvingly. The head of the concern had never looked so happy. John closeted himself at once with a couple of art buyers who acted in the capacity of scouts for Dorning and Son. By the time Rodrigo judged Dorning was free and went in search of him, John had again disappeared, this time, Mary said, to dress for dinner.

Rodrigo found John in their apartment, arrayed in his evening clothes, administering the final touches to his necktie. The Italian told himself a little ironically that Elise Van Zile had reversed the social order of the day in their lodgings—now it was John who was donning festive attire almost every evening and setting out upon social expeditions, and Rodrigo who was left home to settle in a chair with a book. Formerly it had been the reverse. Rodrigo remarked banteringly about this.

"But I have such a wonderful reason for deserting you," John cried. "How she ever happened to decide to like me, when you were available, Rodrigo, I don't know. She is such a beautiful creature—she could have the pick of all the men in the world. And she's just as sweet as she is beautiful. You don't think that I deliberately went out to oust you from her affections, do you, Rodrigo?" John spoke so earnestly that Rodrigo gave a short laugh of

reassurance. But there was a note of anxious pity in it also. Poor old John.

"I understand that you saw another friend of mine to-day, also," Rodrigo said, lighting a cigarette and flicking the match into the open grate.

John dropped his thin fingers from his tie and replied quietly. "Did Mary tell you? I asked her not to."

"She evidently thought it better that I should know, and I think she is right, as usual. What did Sophie Binner want of me—and you?"

John walked over to his friend and put his hands upon Rodrigo's shoulders. He suggested, "Please don't ask me any more about her, Rodrigo. You'll never see or hear from her again. Why not let it go at that?"

Rodrigo replied impatiently, "I'm not a baby, John, I know more about women like Sophie than you do. What was she up to?"

John shrugged his shoulders and decided to make a clean breast. "She looked like the devil—thin and badly dressed. She said her show had failed, left the whole company stranded out in Pocatello, Idaho. Christy and the company manager skipped and went back to England. Sophie pawned her jewels and clothes and just scraped together enough money to get her to New York. So she came to you for help."

Rodrigo relaxed with relief. "Fair enough," he admitted. "I'll stake her to a trip home.

Why didn't you tell her to go away and come back again when I was there?"

John hesitated. "She insisted upon some money at once. She had—some letters from you. I read a couple of them, and they were really pretty serious stuff, Rodrigo. You were never a calm letter-writer. And writing letters to a certain type of woman is very bad business in this country. There are always shyster lawyers around ready to pounce upon them and turn them into money. And she said —well, that you were in her apartment the night her show opened. She mentioned a colored elevator man whom she could summon as a witness, if necessary. But, damn it, I don't believe you were, Rodrigo." John looked at his friend anxiously.

"I was just there for a minute, and it was perfectly harmless," Rodrigo said at once. "It didn't mean a thing and she probably played it up merely to give me a black eye with you. As a matter of fact, I recall that the elevator boy did ride us up and wasn't there when I came down the stairs later. I had a fearful row with her and she's probably out for revenge. But what's Sophie's game anyway—blackmail? She can't get away with it."

John replied, "She threatened to sue you for breach of promise to marry her, said you had jilted her in London once before. She wanted five thousand dollars to call it off. I knew she didn't have a case, but I thought it

was just as well to keep her quiet. So I gave her two thousand dollars. Then I stopped in at the apartment house address she gave me and for a fifty dollar bill persuaded the colored elevator boy that you had never been there."

Rodrigo shook his head and smiled. Was there ever a friend like this innocent-wise John Dorning?

"You're a prince, John," Rodrigo said sincerely. "But you shouldn't have done it. You should have let me face the music." He turned almost fiercely and paced the floor a moment. Returning, he faced John and cried, "I don't know why you have such a sublime faith in me, John. God knows I've given you no reason for it. I was in trouble when you first met me. And that wasn't the first time, as you must have known. And yet you accepted me as a friend and you gave me a start that's resulted in the happiest time of my life. Now, damn it, I throw you down again. I guess I'm just bad."

John laid his hand on the Italian's shoulder. "No, I won't have you condemning yourself. You've been strictly business since you've been over here, I know. This Binner affair is a carry-over from the past. Your letters didn't mean anything, even though they sounded pretty intimate. And that episode in her apartment was just a peculiar combination of circumstances, I can see that."

"Oh, don't make me out a saint, John," Rod-

rigo cried impatiently. "If those crooks in the hall hadn't jolted it out of my head—oh, well, what's the use. Once a weakling, always a weakling."

"Not at all," John retorted. "I'll admit there's one kink in your character I don't understand. I don't see why a chap who is as unselfish, straightforward and worldly wise as you are, can—well, make a fool out of himself with a certain type of woman. It's uncanny."

"It's in my blood. I'll never be able to be absolutely sure of myself," Rodrigo flung out hopelessly. His hands were nervously fingering the table against which he was leaning. He was thinking neither of Sophie nor of Rodrigo. He was seeing the white, disappointed face of Mary Drake, and he knew now what had been troubling her. It did not occur to him to be thrilled that she should care enough about him to be troubled. He was afraid, afraid for his love and his happiness, because he was his own worst enemy. His nervous, groping fingers closed upon a marble figurine, an exquisite carving of a hooded cobra, head raised and ready to strike at a tiger. The tiger, about to spring, had paused and stood, eyes upon the snake, as if fascinated. It was among his art treasures that he had brought from Italy.

"You'll be sure of yourself," John was saying, "when the right girl comes along." He smiled, and Rodrigo realized with a pang that

John was thinking of *his* right girl, Elise Van Zile.

"What chance will I ever have with the right sort of girl when the wrong sort may come along first?" And Rodrigo too was thinking of Elise. He suddenly realized that his fingers were digging into something hard until they hurt. He looked down at the figurine, and lifted it.

"Here I am!" he cried. "I'm this tiger! I never told you why I brought this figurine with me, why I've always cherished it, have I? Well, one reason is because my father gave it to me when I was a boy as the momento of a very exciting afternoon. It happened in India when I was about fourteen years old. We were riding on an elephant, and we could see over a high wall into a sort of a lane that led to an enclosure where a chap who used to make a business of capturing wild animals for museums and circuses kept his stock. He let the beasts roam around in there, and my father would take me to the other side of the wall to see them.

"Well, on this afternoon, a big, silky tiger came walking down the lane. Suddenly, when he was just about opposite us, he stopped short —like this statue—his head down. He stared at something. We followed his shining eyes. A cobra had slipped out of the box in which the chap kept his snakes. The tiger stared as if paralyzed, fascinated, a yard from the snake's head. A cobra! That's the wrong kind of a

girl—a cobra. Mind you, this tiger could have killed the thing with one blow of his paw. He could have killed a lion, or scattered a regiment. Yet he stood there, his eyes held by the eyes of the cobra. All at once he tossed his head up and took a step backward—and the cobra struck."

"Struck! Did he kill the tiger?"

"I don't know. I felt sick. My father saw how white I was, and we left at once. Several months later he saw this figurine in a shop in Calcutta and bought it. He gave it to me."

John looked at him and said slowly, "Perhaps a cobra can't really kill anything as big and strong as a tiger."

"It can make it bad for him, though. I can remember Dad cursing that he didn't have a gun with him. A gun! That's you, John. When I've been walking lately, I've usually had you along, and I've been pretty safe from cobras."

"It's safer not to go walking at all."

"Well, even a tiger has to have some diversion," Rodrigo tried to lighten up the serious turn the conversation had taken. As John walked over to the mirror and resumed his adjusting of his cravat, Rodrigo said suddenly, "And guns too, John—sometimes guns don't act as they should, very good guns, too. And cobras raise the dickens with them too."

But John had hardly heard him, much less gotten the meaning of his friend's cryptic

speech. And Rodrigo was instantly glad. John was so infatuated with Elise that mere words would never undeceive him. It must be something stronger than words. Likewise, Rodrigo must make very sure that Elise Van Zile was what he had described to John as the cobra type of woman.

After John left, Rodrigo sat down and tried to interest himself in a large, profusely illustrated volume on interior decoration. But he was in no mood to concentrate upon the hopelessly conventional illustrations and the dry, prosaic text. He flung the book down at length, and, lighting his pipe, walked nervously about the apartment. He was thinking of John and Elise Van Zile, and of himself. His feeling toward the sudden infatuation of his friend for Mrs. Palmer's niece and Elise's sudden interest in John contained not one atom of jealousy. Had she been the girl John thought she was, Rodrigo would have been delighted and would have rendered the match every assistance.

But Elise, Rodrigo kept telling himself, was the girl *he* thought she was. This business today of Sohpie Binner, this tale of the cobra he had related to John, this whole raking up of his past had had a depressing effect upon him. The world looked awry that evening.

He confessed, after fifteen minutes of aimless walking about, that he was perhaps seeing things through a glass darkly. But of this much he was quite certain: Elise Van Zile was clever.

Though John Dorning was not the type of man who appealed to her, she might decide to marry him for his money. Married or single, she would always be selfish, unscrupulous. She wanted a rich, safe husband.

If the husband were John Dorning, this would bring tragedy.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Rodrigo tried to denounce the whole thing as nonsense and, catching up his hat, departed from the apartment in search of something to eat, though he wasn't in the least hungry. He wanted to get out, get away from himself, get where there were people, noise, laughter.

He walked over to Broadway and deliberately chose a cheap restaurant where race-track touts, vaudeville and burlesque actors and actresses, theatrical agents and motion picture press agents absorb indigestible food. But the gum-chewing waitresses and clattery crockery failed to divert him. He hardly touched his food. Rising, he paid what the muscular waitress had punched on his ticket, and walked back to the apartment through the surging tide of the Broadway theatre traffic.

Back in his living-room, he settled down with his book again. But he could not read. He fell to brooding again. And out of his brooding came finally a mad plan to save John Dorning. As well have the game as the name, Rodrigo laughed ironically. He had done so many foolish things for his own pleasure. God

might now forgive this last one if it were done unselfishly, to save a saint. For John Dorning was almost a saint to Rodrigo. Their friendship was a thing almost sacred. But it was better to kill even this sacred thing, Rodrigo reasoned solemnly, than to hurt John Dorning.

So the following afternoon he called Elise Van Zile on the telephone from his office and, putting into his voice all the mellow intimacy that he knew so well how to convey, he said, "I have missed you so much, Elise. John interrupted our last little chat just when it was becoming so interesting, and took you away. I'd so much more to tell you. We have such a great deal in common, as you were good enough to say. I'm wondering when I may see you again."

There was silence for a moment, and then her smooth tones came over the wire, "Why, certainly. Aunt Helen and I will be delighted to see you any time."

He lowered his accents. "Not, Auntie—you, you alone. You said you would like to come again to our apartment. And this time I will promise we won't be interrupted. Not even by John. I want so badly to see you—Elise. Won't you come?"

After a long pause, her voice came noncommittedly, "When?"

"On Saturday afternoon at three?"

Another long pause, and then she said faintly, "I shall be there."

Rodrigo hung up the receiver and took a long, deep breath. Then he walked into John's office and, taking advantage of Mary's temporary absence, said, "John, I want you to promise me something."

"What is it, old man? And why the terrifically serious look on your face?"

Rodrigo forced a smile. "I want you to stay away from the apartment until three-thirty next Saturday afternoon," he said. "At that time I want you to meet me there, and probably I'll have something very interesting to show you?"

"But my birthday isn't until next month, Rodrigo?" John bantered. "Did you go out and buy that Gainsborough original I fancied so much—or what?"

"Please don't ask any questions, John. And believe that I'm deadly serious. Three-thirty. Will you be there?"

"Why, of course—if you say so."

During the rest of the week, Rodrigo was like a man who has had the date of his electrocution set. He could not work, eat, nor sleep. John remarked about it. Mary Drake regarded him anxiously from behind his back.

At noon the following Saturday, Rodrigo heard John leaving his office and hastened to stop him. He had not reminded John of his engagement of the afternoon, but now he said,

"You haven't forgotten about coming to the apartment at three-thirty, have you, John?"

"Oh, I'll be there. You're so darned mysterious about it that you've aroused my curiosity."

Rodrigo felt a grim satisfaction. He did not purpose to have his electrocution bungled by the absence of the man who was to turn on the electricity.

Having with some awkwardness and difficulty disposed of Mrs. Brink, the housekeeper, who showed a disposition to dawdle at her work so that she might gossip with him, Rodrigo, at three o'clock that afternoon, was trying desperately to interest himself in a newspaper. He was arrayed in a purple silken dressing-gown. Soft cushions were piled invitingly upon the divan. The shades had been drawn discreetly, so that the room was in a semi-shadow. Whisky and soda stood upon a slim taboret.

He waited impatiently for fifteen minutes. Then his nerves tingled as he heard the elevator door outside roll open and someone stepped out into the corridor. An instant later the apartment bell chimed. Rodrigo gravely arose. His face broke into an excellent imitation of a smile of hearty welcome. He opened the door. A freckle-faced, gawky messenger boy grinned on the threshold, handed him two telegrams and pointed with a chewed stump of a pencil where to sign in the book.

Rodrigo, mystified and disappointed, broke the envelope of one of the telegrams. His face

turned pale and his chin quivered, like a man suddenly attacked with a chill, as he read:

> Congratulate me. Elise and I married at Greenwich five minutes ago. I am the happiest man in the world.
>
> JOHN.

He walked falteringly over to the deep armchair and sat down before he had the courage to open the other yellow container.

> Sorry I had to miss our engagement. Just as well perhaps. Forgive me for influencing John to break his date.
>
> ELISE VAN ZILE.

For the first time in his life, Rodrigo cursed a lady. But mingled with his resentment against her was a frank tribute to her cleverness. For he hadn't a doubt in the world now but that Elise had seen through his stratagem and had taken this decisive step to outwit him.

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

TO RODRIGO THERL WAS SOMETHING DANGEROUS IN THE WAY JOHN HUNG UPON HER WORDS.

CHAPTER XII

One glorious morning, three weeks later, when the June sunshine bathed Fifth Avenue in a benevolent light and the staff of Dorning and Son edged over as near the doors and windows as possible and made lugubrious remarks about their luck at being shut up from the paradise outdoors, the door of Rodrigo's office was flung open and John Dorning burst in.

"Rodrigo!" he cried, and stood there near the door smiling happily and blushing furiously, looking wonderfully well and boyish.

Rodrigo sprang up at once and congratulated him heartily.

"I'm the happiest man in the world," John repeated the words of the fateful telegram, and, Rodrigo admitted, he looked it. His face was bronzed and suffused with health, the result of many hours upon the golf links and in the lake adjoining the elaborate Adirondack "lodge" where the Dornings had been spending their honeymoon. A feeling of relief for the moment and optimism for the future swept through Rodrigo. Perhaps, after all, he had misjudged Elise. Though, he told himself, it is a very rare marriage that does not at least survive the honeymoon.

"Sit right down and tell me how the elopement all happened," invited Rodrigo gayly, "you old scoundrel."

"Well, to begin at the beginning," said John exuberantly, "I had an engagement with Elise in the evening on that Saturday you wanted me to come to the apartment in the middle of afternoon, do you remember? Around noontime Elise telephoned me and said she was sorry but she would have to cancel the evening engagement. She had to go to some charity committee meeting or other with her aunt. I insisted upon seeing her, and she finally agreed that we would have luncheon together and go for a short ride in my car. I told her of my mystery date with you, and we enjoyed a good laugh about it, old man, though, of course, she insisted upon my keeping it. And I assure you I had every intention in the world of doing so. But we got out on the Post Road, and it was such a wonderful afternoon—well, anyway, I guess I made love to her, and then miraculously she said she would marry me. I said 'When?' and she replied, 'Oh, it would be so romantic to do it at once.' She was set against a fussy wedding of any kind. Didn't even want to let my dad or sister know. I agreed, of course, being darned lucky to get her any way at all. So we stopped at Stamford. Afterward I telephoned Dad and sent you a telegram, and we started on our honeymoon."

"Great stuff!" Rodrigo enthused. "John,

for a lad who has always fought shy of the ladies, you certainly put it over in whirlwind style. What are you going to do now?''

John hitched his chair nearer, beaming with high spirits. ''My luck has kept right on rolling in, Rodrigo. I happened to meet a chap from home at the place we were staying. He mentioned that Ned Fernald was putting his new place on the market. It seems Ned isn't so well off as he's supposed to be, and building the place and outfitting it has strapped him so completely that now he's anxious to sell. It's a peach of a big house, with lots of ground, in the Millbank section, a new development. I'm going to get in touch with Ned, and Elise and I have agreed that if we can arrive at the proper price, we'll buy it.''

Rodrigo averred that it sounded excellent. ''But where is the blushing bride?'' he added.

''She's on her way to Greenwich. I just said good-bye to her and her aunt at Grand Central. She's going to stop with Dad and Alice in Greenwich until we get a place of our own.''

''She's never met your folks, has she?'' asked Rodrigo. He wondered what Henry Dorning would think of his daughter-in-law, whether his experienced old eyes would penetrate to things in her that his infatuated son had never dreamed of.

''I'm sure they'll love her as much as I do,'' John enthused. ''They can't help it. She's the greatest ever. Dad knows Mrs. Palmer, Elise's

aunt, very well, so I got her to go along up."

Two hours later, he came back into Rodrigo's office to announce that he was leaving to subway down-town and seek out Edward Fernald, who was a minor partner in a brokerage house on Nassau Street. John confided further that he was, as yet, quite unable to settle down to the workaday problems of Dorning and Son. He was still walking upon air.

"You'll have to put up with my incompetence for a while, till I get used to the idea of being married to the world's greatest wife," he pleaded smilingly with Rodrigo.

"Take your time," soothed the latter. "I'll be indulgent. We don't have a marriage in the firm every day."

"I wish some nice girl like Elise would capture you," John offered seriously.

Rodrigo laughed. "Oh, that's what all you newlyweds preach to us happy old bachelors."

Nevertheless he dropped in to see what Mary thought of the returned and changed Dorning, after John had left.

"Mrs. Dorning is very lucky," said Mary. "John is the sort who will devote his whole life to making his wife happy."

She said it so positively that she put him a trifle on the defensive. "Any normal husband would do that, wouldn't he?" he asked a little challengely.

She was silent a moment, and then she said, evidently out of a troubled mind and into her

typewriter, "Some men aren't equipped to be normal husbands."

He looked at her gravely, his eyes full of love for her. Some day soon he was going to have it out with Mary, he told himself. He would have to. Things couldn't go on with them as they had been. He had called upon her many times now out of office hours, met her mother, taken Mary to the theatre, to art exhibitions, and to concerts and the opera. Always he had avoided making love to her, because he was desperately afraid of losing her through having his intentions misunderstood. He had wanted, on many occasions, to sweep her into his arms, to cover her face with kisses, to claim her for his own, but he was afraid. He could not risk kissing Mary until he was very sure she loved him. Before the Sophie Binner blackmailing episode, he had been optimistic about Mary's feelings toward him. But during the last few months the issue had been cast again into doubt.

Frequently he told himself almost bitterly that if Mary loved him she would be willing to forget utterly anything that had happened to him in the past. But this, in his more rational moments, he knew was asking too much. She was not the sort of girl who rushes blindly into love. Her whole character and training were influences in the opposite direction. Love must come upon her gradually. She must be very sure. Americanized though he was by this time, the very fact that Rodrigo was a man

of another country from her own, with other ideals and up-bringing, made the process of falling in love with him for this serious-minded American girl groping and slow. But, once he had won her, he knew that she would be his forever, utterly, without question or regret. That was Mary Drake's way too.

Two weeks later John Dorning announced that he had bought the Fernald house, and he eagerly discussed with Rodrigo furnishing the place according to their high artistic standards. The Italian, on one pretext or another, declined several invitations to go to Greenwich and look over the Fernald property and the married Elise. John was insistent that Rodrigo rush up and congratulate Elise in person, and then just try and deny that John was the luckiest fellow ever born. Elise had been asking for Rodrigo, John said, had urged John to invite him up. Rodrigo smiled benevolently, and declined. He did not, for the time being, wish to face this clever, attractive, and triumphant young lady.

But, at last, when the John Dornings had actually moved into the Fernald house and the rare old furniture and *objets d'art,* which Rodrigo had helped to select, were installed to the young householder's liking, Rodrigo could no longer decline the invitation to spend a week-end with them without offending his friend.

Elise met them at the Greenwich station in a trim new little sedan. Rodrigo congratulated

her heartily, and she gave him very pretty thanks. She was looking exceptionally alluring, lending an exotic distinction even to the tweedy sport clothes she was wearing.

"I am especially grateful to you, Rodrigo—I suppose I may call you that now," she added, "because you were instrumental in bringing John and me together." Rodrigo glanced at her a little sharply, wondering if there was a double meaning in this. But her smile was serene, though those enigmatic eyes were just a little narrower than normal.

"It is glorious out here. I love it," she tossed over her shoulder to him, as he sat, unusually quiet in the tonneau of the moving car beside his bag and golf sticks. And as she swept the car into the newly made driveway of their artistic home of field-stone and stucco, "Aren't we lucky to get this place? It is the first home of my own that I have ever had. I love every stone in it."

Rodrigo admitted to himself that she was giving an excellent imitation of a very happy young bride.

John showed him through the house later, and Rodrigo was very sincere in his praise of their dwelling and its broad, attractive surroundings. The close-cropped lawn sloped down gradually to a small lake, surrounded by willow trees, a body of fresh water that eventually found its way into the neighboring sound. John explained that there was a concrete dam

below, with a private bathing beach of white sand and crystal-clear water. Millbank was a new development, very much restricted and exclusive, with a fine nine-hole golf course just across the lake. When Rodrigo cast pleased eyes upon the links, John recalled that Warren Pritchard, on learning of Rodrigo's coming, had immediately spoken for the guest's company on Sunday morning at the Greenwich Country Club.

"I believe Ben Bryon and Lon Sisson are anxious for a revenge match on account of the beating you and Warren gave them the last time," John explained, indicating by his tone of voice that he didn't consider the engagement so pressing as Warren evidently did, and that he would have preferred to retain Rodrigo's company himself.

"That will be fine," Rodrigo enthused. "That is, if you haven't other plans for me, John?" John shook his head in the negative.

He motored to Stamford that evening with his host and hostess and attended the first night of a polite comedy, destined for its New York premiére the following week. The play was not particularly interesting, and Rodrigo paid more attention to the audience than to the stage. It was a mixed crowd of typical small-towners, well dressed and highly sun-tanned people from adjacent Long Island Sound resorts, and professionals from Broadway who were either interested in the production or the players. He

recognized the producer of the piece, a jolly, corpulent individual whom he had met at the Coffee House Club. They ran into each other in the outside lobby between the first and second act, and the theatrical admitted blithely that he had a "flop" and was debating whether to dismiss the company at once and forfeit his deposit on the lease of the Broadway theatre or chance a performance in New York.

To Rodrigo, walking down the aisle as the orchestra was playing the unmelodious prelude to the second act, came the realization anew that Elise was quite the most striking-looking woman he had ever known. Her creamy white shoulders billowing up from her black evening dress, her raven hair sleeked tightly against her skull, her dark eyes either feeling or feigning vivacious interest as she inclined her head to listen to John's animated conversation, she was easily the most beautiful person in front or behind the footlights. He sensed the strong magnetism of her presence as he took the seat on the other side of her, and she said smilingly to him, "I was telling John how bad this play is, but he seems only to have noticed that the settings are in atrocious taste."

"He's right," Rodrigo acknowledged, and, thinking this was rather curt, added, "And so are you."

"You find the audience more interesting?" she asked shrewdly.

"Yes, part of it," he said quickly, without

thinking, and then cursed himself for betraying that she exerted some of her old spell over him. A sudden enigmatic smile crinkled her eyes and mouth as she gazed full at him an instant, then turned abruptly to John.

He played golf with John's brother-in-law and his two companions the next morning and had the satisfaction of being largely responsible for another victory for Pritchard and himself. The latter was as tickled as if he had captured a championship. "Come again next week-end, Rodrigo, and we'll give these birds a real ride," he proclaimed loudly for the defeated ones' benefit. But Rodrigo would not promise.

In the afternoon he pleaded pressure of work and an unbreakable dinner engagement as an excuse for leaving. John protested loudly, but his guest was adamant. At about five o'clock, they drove him to the station. Elise took the seat beside him in the tonneau and, just before they reached the station, she asked, "When are we to see you again? I was in town two or three times last week. Twice I telephoned John for lunch, and he was too busy or out or something. The next time, I warn you, I am going to invite you to give me luncheon, Rodrigo, and you mustn't refuse me." And as if to assure him that her intentions were innocent, she repeated the same thing to John in a louder voice. He laughed back and said, "Of course. I want you two to be great friends."

"Isn't she the most wonderful wife in the

world?" John whispered to him as he grasped the step-rods of the train.

"Yes, she is a wonderful woman," Rodrigo replied sincerely, and looked over John's head to return her languid wave of good-bye.

Going back in the train, he thought of her and John, and of their chances for happiness. He recalled the conversation Warren Pritchard had hesitantly started on the way to the golf links that morning, and then dropped.

"I say, Rodrigo," Warren had begun, after fumbling around obviously for an opening, "I know it may sound caddish of me, and I shouldn't be talking this way, but what really do you know of this lady whom my brother-in-law has married?"

"Oh, I only know her slightly," Rodrigo had replied offhandedly. "She comes of an excellent San Francisco family, I believe, connected with the Palmers—your father-in-law knows the Palmers well."

"I wasn't thinking of her family. But will she make old John happy?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. She isn't at all the sort I would have thought John would have picked for a wife. Very stunning woman, worldly wise, she must have had hundreds of men eager to marry her. John is a fine chap, we all know, but he's not the kind to knock a beautiful woman's eye out exactly."

"She seems to love him very much. And

he's crazy about her, of course. Their marriage looks very promising to me."

Warren shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, well, it's as I thought. If you do know anything more about her, you're too damned much of a gentleman to spill it—and I'm not enough of a scoundrel to press you for it. I may add, though, in my own justification and with his sanction, that my honored father-in-law is the one who is slightly worried and who set me up to questioning you. Frankly, he is a bit suspicious of the lady. And his judgment is not to be slighted, you know; he has an uncanny faculty for fathoming folks."

The more praise for Henry Dorning's acumen, Rodrigo had thought, and the more pity too, for it is not pleasant to note rumblings of disaster from afar and to be unable either to warn or to confide.

CHAPTER XIII

About a week later, Rodrigo had a business conference that resulted in an unexpected meeting and a pleasant adventure compensating in some measure for his ill success in thwarting the clever Elise.

He had been conferring in the studio of a mural painter named Washburn, who was doing some highly intricate work for Dorning and Son, when he happened to look at his watch and discovered it was after one o'clock in the afternoon. Neither had had lunch, and Washburn invited Rodrigo to accompany him to a luncheon gathering of the Dutch Treat Club, an organization of the most successful artists, authors and other members of the intelligentsia in New York, at the Hotel Martinique.

The luncheon was already in progress when they entered the crowded room, but they managed to find two vacant chairs at a round table of chattering men.

"Well—it's the Count himself!" came a booming voice from the chair beside Rodrigo and he stared into the welcoming face of Bill Terhune.

They had little opportunity to talk during

the luncheon and the program of entertainment that followed, consisting of an ex-heavyweight champion pugilist, who offered racy reminiscences of his famous victory over John L. Sullivan, and a very ebullient Russian soprano. But Washburn left them later, and Rodrigo enjoyed a talk with his friend as they mingled with the crowds on sunshiny Fifth Avenue.

"You look great, Bill," Rodrigo said sincerely.

"Haven't touched a drop since that night with Binner and her friend," Terhune declared solemnly. "You know, that party taught me a lesson. I got home the next night and found my wife had been very seriously ill—an attack of ptomaine or something that blamed near carried her off. And I had lied to her and told her I was detained in town on business. She was feeling rotten when I phoned the lie, but she told me of course to stay. Well, it brought me to my senses, and I took the pledge then and there. You know, a fellow don't know how lucky he is to have a wife like mine till he darned near loses her. I'm the model husband from now on, old boy. Swore off my class reunion at Princeton and everything." Bill looked at his companion, a little abashed at his long, intense confession. He tried to pass it off by saying more lightly, "Say, you ought to meet my wife. Why don't you?"

"Why don't you let me then?" Rodrigo grinned in reply.

"By Jove, I will," Bill resolved. "Say—I tell you. I've got a couple of extra tickets for the Princeton-Yale commencement baseball game at Princeton Saturday. Why don't you get somebody and come along with us? You'll like it. You've never seen anything like it—all the Princeton grads parading in costume, plenty of color and jazz and all that sort of thing. Have you got a girl or somebody to take? Not Binner, of course."

So it happened that Rodrigo drove Mary Drake over to the Terhune home in East Orange the next Saturday bright and early in the morning. Bill's wife proved to be a very pretty, vivacious girl of about Mary's own age. There was a three-year-old daughter who took to Rodrigo and Mary at once and embarrassed them by asking innocently if they were married.

They started off merrily, the girls in the back seat and the men in front, and joined the long procession of blue and orange-and-black bannered cars rolling along the road out of Newark and across the New Jersey flats.

Princeton was jammed with gay throngs. All the vacant lots were dotted with reunion tents, and old and young men in Scottish Highlander costumes, sailor suits, clown suits, and all manner of outlandish rigs mingled with the plain citizens and pretty girls on Nassau Street. Having parked the car, they joined the mobs. Bill had to stop every few feet, it seemed

to Rodrigo, to greet friends of his college days. Rodrigo judged that his companion must have been the most popular man who ever went to Princeton.

Bill took them to lunch at his club down Prospect Street with its close-cropped lawns and cool shade-trees. Afterward he left them momentarily to parade with his class into the athletic field, Rodrigo escorting the two girls to their seats in the crowded grandstand. It was a gorgeous panorama of color, youth and vivacity. Never had Mary Drake seemed so happy and carefree. Never had she smiled at him so gayly and intimately, Rodrigo told himself.

To make the afternoon's pleasure complete, Princeton won the ball game and the Terhune party stood up on the wooden boards and watched the mad, whirling phantasmagoria of victory-crazed undergraduates and graduates alike gyrating in dervish fashion in the age-old snake dance down there on the scene of the triumph.

They motored back at a snail's pace, forced to throttle their speed by the long lines of cars ahead of them. They stopped in Newark and had dinner at a clean little restaurant on South Broad Street. Later, Rodrigo secured his own car from Bill's garage and, with sincere expressions of thanks and farewell, left the happy Terhune family waving at them from the trim suburban lawn.

"Oh, I have loved every minute of it!" Mary

exclaimed when they were alone. "Thank you a thousand times for inviting me along."

"Its been wonderful to have you," he replied. "You've added a lot to my pleasure. We'll have lots of nice little parties this summer, Mary—at the beach and other places."

Later she said, as if she had been reflecting upon it for some time, "I did not know you were acquainted with and liked quiet, homey people like the Terhunes."

And he was very glad that Bill had changed.

The summer droned by, with the requisite number of heat waves, during which the newspapers screamed in black headlines of prostrations and of hundreds of thousands sleeping on Coney Island's sands; and the compensating number of comfortable periods in between too. John Dorning showed an ever-growing inclination to spend these hot spells away from the office, idling under the willows at Millbank. In many weeks, he did not appear on Fifth Avenue more than two or three days. John was making up for the long years he had kept clerk's hours, winter and summer. For the first time in his life, he had learned how to play. He had found in Elise an interest even more confining than Dorning and Son. He was hardly happy away from her.

Rodrigo rather enjoyed the added responsibility placed upon his own shoulders. And he did not particularly mind the heat. Frequently he would bundle himself and Mary Drake, who

had taken over some of the recreant John's duties and was working harder than ever, into his recently purchased roadster, late in the afternoon, and dash out of the city's glare to Long Beach for a cooling swim. They would have supper at a shore roadhouse on the return, and he would deliver her to her Brooklyn home while it was still early in the evening, remaining for a chat with Mary and her mother or going back to New York for a theatre or other engagement. Rodrigo was quite sure that Mrs. Drake, who was keen-witted in spite of her wan face and mouselike quietness, liked him and approved of his interest in Mary.

Late in August, a museum project upon which John Dorning had been working for nearly a year, abruptly came up for decision and the committee in charge requested him to come out and meet with them. Rodrigo offered himself as a substiute, but John's conscience asserted itself at last and he declared he must really make the trip in person. It was the first time Elise and he had been separated, and he did not fancy it in the least, though it would be for only three days. Nevertheless, he superintended the packing of the models of the pieces Dorning and Son had submitted, saw them shipped off, and followed them two days later.

The morning after he left, Rodrigo's telephone rang. Elise was on the wire inviting him to take her to lunch. She was at Grand Central, she said, and would meet him at

twelve-thirty. Rodrigo was filled with a curious mixture of annoyance and pleasure. She had promised frankly in the presence of her husband to do this very thing. There could be no harm in it. And yet he knew that there would always be danger to him in being alone anywhere with this woman, and the danger, he had to admit, was what gave the thing its interest. He finally issued the desired invitation and met her in the lobby of the Biltmore.

She was the soul of cool loveliness and discretion as they chatted over the salad and iced tea. Her friendliness lulled to sleep the resentment he now unconsciously always erected against her.

"I called you up one afternoon lately," she offered innocently, stirring the tall, iced glass with the long glass spoon, "and they told me at the office that you had gone to Long Beach swimming. It's so stiflingly hot this afternoon. Wouldn't it be jolly to be out there?"

He admitted that it would.

"You're thinking that I am frightfully bold," she admitted. "And I *am*. Frightfully warm too. Won't you, for John's sake, prevent John's wife from perishing by taking her swimming? Or did your mother once warn you not to go near the water?"

She could have followed no surer course of goading him to comply with her wishes. Rodrigo flushed. His dark eyes shone. No woman had ever before told him thus bluntly that he

was afraid of her. He accepted the dare. "I keep my car in a garage near here," he said rather curtly. "If you will wait a few moments in the lobby, I will pick you up, and we will spend the afternoon as you suggest."

They hardly spoke as he whipped the car in and out through the closely packed traffic of the uptown streets and the Queensboro Bridge. Once out beyond Long Island City, he pressed upon the accelerator and conversation became almost impossible. Long Beach was nearly as crowded as upon a Saturday or Sunday. It was by no means an exclusive resort. The children of the proletariat mingled with paunchy stock brokers and with actresses looking strangely old, with the artificial coloring washed off their faces by the relentless salt water.

Elsie and Rodrigo changed into rented bathing suits. Even in the makeshift outfit, she looked amazingly well, and he was quick to tell her so. She acknowledged the compliment with her slow, languid smile. "You are quite an Adonis yourself, as you probably know," she drawled, and raced him into the surf. They alternately swam and rested side by side upon the sand until dusk. Elise seemed to be content to act the witty, cheerful companion and Rodrigo dropped his guard and enjoyed himself. He had not known she could be so impersonally charming. This was the side of her varied personality that she had shown to John, that had enthralled him. Rodrigo could under-

stand the attraction which she had for his friend now.

Rodrigo clasped his hands under his head, sprawled at full length upon the white sand and allowed thoughts of Dorning and Son and even of Mary to slip from his mind. He was oblivious of the world as he looked idly out into the tumbling surf, oblivious of Elise until she addressed a trivial, bantering remark to him. He turned lazily to face her and said, "You are a wonderful sport when you want to be, aren't you, Elise?"

"I should arise and make you a pretty courtesy if it weren't so warm," she replied with equal unconcern. And, after an interval, she added dryly, "You really fancy this stenographer-and-employer style of spending an afternoon in the great open spaces?"

He looked at her quickly, but he decided that she alluded not to Mary Drake in particular, but to the crowd in general that shared the sand with them, and he had to admit that there were many couples among them that seemed to answer her description.

"My tastes are simple," he said lightly. "The proletarian ideas of pleasures seem to appeal to me,"

"I didn't know the European nobility had turned so democratic," she jibed.

"The Prince of Wales is our mentor. When on Long Island, do as the Prince does. But really, my title means very little, you know.

And I am three-quarters an American by this time. I took out my first citizenship papers last week."

She protested at once, "You shouldn't have done that. It means that you renounce your title, doesn't it? Rodrigo, you shouldn't. Now I suppose you will marry some simple American girl, have a house in Westchester, and raise a brood of ruddy-faced little American urchins."

"That would be great stuff," he admitted.

"Fancy the immaculately attired Count Torriani hoeing a garden," she laughed. "But I can't fancy it—it requires too much imagination for such a warm day. Moreover, I am hungry, kind sir. Could you possibly give me a lobster dinner somewhere about here? I should love it."

He sprang up at once with an exclamation of assent. They dressed in their respective bathhouses. Later they dined slowly and satisfactorily at the Hotel Nassau and started back for New York in the sultry dusk of the summer evening. The salt tang was heavy in the air. A slight breeze was making fitful efforts to blow in toward them from the sea. Most of the daytime sojourners at Long Beach had already departed for apartment house dinners and engagements in town; the night crowd had not yet arrived. The roads were, in consequence, comparatively deserted.

They spun along in silence for half an hour

or more. Then she said quietly, "You have not tried to make love to me at all, have you?"

His hand trembled slightly on the wheel and he pretended not to have heard her.

"Do you then find me less attractive than you once did, Rodrigo?" she asked.

"You are very beautiful," he said gravely, without looking at her. "But you happen now to be the wife of my best friend."

"In the suburban community in which we reside, it is considered quite *au fait* to flirt with one's friends' wives," she offered with simulated innocence.

"Really?" he countered. "But I am just a conventional New Yorker."

She had edged closer to him and the attraction of her presence was undeniable. But when, after several minutes, he showed no inclination to pursue the theme, she slumped into the seat away from him and said coolly, "You may drop me at my aunt's. I have an engagement with her to attend some fearful concert or other. Unless you would care to drive me all the way to Greenwich."

"I too unfortunately have an engagement," he prevaricated so quickly that she recognized it as a prevarication.

Soon they were in the congested, sprawly, factory-studded Long Island City and had joined the slow-moving line of cars headed across the Fifty-ninth Street bridge for the metropolis.

He parted with her at the residence of Mrs. Porter Palmer, saying in adieu, "I have truly enjoyed our little jaunt very much, Elise." She smiled and left him non-committedly. He thoughtfully piloted the car back to the garage.

After putting the car away, he walked back through the still sweltering streets to his apartment. A telegram rested upon the center table. It was from John Dorning and stated that unforeseen developments would keep him in Philadelphia over the week-end. Rodrigo smiled at John's probable whole-hearted annoyance at fate for forcing him to remain at the home of the pompous chairman of the library committee.

A special delivery letter, pink and delicately scented, arrived at Rodrigo's office the next afternoon.

> Dear Rodrigo:
>
> Please come out with us for the week-end. John and I will be so delighted. Telephone me when to meet you.
>
> Elise.

He frowned and tore the note into bits. Undoubtedly she too had received word from John that he would not be home. Why was she still trying to involve him? He tried in vain to excuse her, to convince himself that she did not know of her husband's intended absence. He decided to ignore the invitation entirely.

John Dorning did not appear at his office until Tuesday morning. Yes, he said, he had concluded his mission satisfactorily, though he would probably have to return to Philapelphia a few weeks later to supervise the installation of the paintings and statuary involved in the deal. He discussed the matter lugubriously in Rodrigo's office.

"Of course you, being a confirmed old bachelor, can't appreciate what it means being away from your home and wife," he said half-seriously, while Rodrigo smiled indulgently. "I never was so glad to see Elise in my life." His face sobered a bit. "But tell me, Rodrigo, there is no—er—constraint of any kind between Elise and you, is there? You are the same old friends, aren't you?"

Rodrigo was on his guard instantly. "Of course. Why?"

"Nothing—only she tells me she wrote you a letter, before she got my wire that I wouldn't be home for the week-end, inviting you up, and you never even acknowledged it."

"It *was* caddish of me," Rodrigo replied. "I'm sorry. I'll apologize very humbly to Elise the first time I see her."

John put up a deprecating hand. "Oh, that's all right, old boy. Only I'm so anxious for you and Elise to be close friends. You don't know what a wonderful girl she really is. You know, I'm so incredibly happy that I want to share the cause of my happiness—Elise—with

you as much as I can. I feel you're being cheated, sort of, because you haven't found the right girl too."

Rodrigo regarded him thoughtfully. "You *are* happy, aren't you? I don't believe I deserve that kind of happiness. If I did, I'd go after it. Because I really believe that I have found the right girl. Next to you, she's been the biggest help in the world to me."

"Rodrigo! That's great." John's eyes were wide with pleasure. "Who is she?"

"Mary Drake," Rodrigo said with quick intensity. "But I don't deserve a fine girl like her. I haven't the nerve to—"

John walked over, his back to the door, and put his arm upon his friend's shoulder. "Don't you think she would be the best judge of that? Have you told her that you love her?"

Rodrigo shook his head.

John continued. "But is that fair to her? Suppose she loves you—and—you know, if I'm any judge, I think probably she does."

"How could she?" Rodrigo suddenly cried emotionally. "A girl like her—all soul and sweetness. I know that love doesn't demand perfections. If I told her I loved her, I couldn't lie to her—I would have to tell her the whole truth about my past, about Rosa and Sophie and the rest. She might forgive—but she might despise me too. And I couldn't stand that, John. When I first knew I cared for her, I made up my mind to attend strictly to business

and to make myself worthy of Mary. And I have. With the exception of that harmless little episode with Sophie Binner, I haven't taken my nose from the grindstone a minute. And yet I'm not the man for a girl like Mary."

"That's just egotism, Rodrigo," John said sternly. "You're setting yourself up as a sort of God over Mary's destiny as well as your own. You haven't looked at the matter from her point of view at all. You think you could be happy with her?"

"I know it—I dream of nothing else!"

"Then why don't you give her the chance to say whether or not she could be happy with you? Perhaps she dreams of nothing else too. None of us are angels. None of us are privileged to ignore any chances of happiness. It's up to each one of us, man or woman, to accept humbly, gratefully, every bit of real happiness and beauty that life sends our way."

"You're right, John," Rodrigo replied simply. He tried to turn the conversation to a lighter vein, to conceal how deeply he was moved. "You're quite a philosopher, aren't you, old man? God bless you for it. I know you think a lot of Mary, and of me, and I'm grateful." His eyes suddenly turned toward the door as he realized that a third person had stepped into the room.

A clerk was standing uneasily just over the threshold, and now said in considerable agi-

tation, "A Mr. Rosner is here to see Mr. Dorning."

"Damn!" exclaimed John. "Send him away and tell him to come back to-morrow. I'm frightfully busy."

The clerk hesitated. "He said it was very urgent."

Dorning had turned his back toward the door and was facing Rodrigo. To his surprise, he saw the latter suddenly stare, grow tense and excited. John wheeled around as Rodrigo took a quick stride toward the door.

Rosner, without waiting for the clerk's answer, had slipped past him and into the office. And what a Rosner! Putty-pale, gaunt-cheeked, unshaven, wild-eyed!

"Thought you'd send me away, eh?" he almost screamed. "See me to-morrow, eh? Well, you'll see me now, John Dorning!"

Rodrigo quickly slammed the door shut and, turning to Rosner, whipped out, "Don't yell like a madman, Rosner. Sit down and tell us what it's all about."

"I've got nothing to do with *you*," Rosner cried fiercely. "It's him I got to reckon with." He pointed at John. The man was shaking all over, his eyes blazing with a strange light. "He knows! He sold me that black and ruby Huin Tsin vase—five thousand dollars. He knew I had to buy it. I had to replace it for a customer, or go out of business. He knew that."

"It was less than it was worth," John tried to explain. "And I took your note."

"I know damned well you did, *damned* well!" cried the hysterical Rosner. "And your father took a mortgage."

"Mr. Dorning's lawyer, Mr. Bates—Emerson Bates—is the man to see about that. Mr. Dorning doesn't handle those matters at all." Rodrigo tried to soothe the ranting Rosner. The man was ill, beside himself.

"Lawyers are paid to do as they're told!" Rosner yelled hoarsely, gasping as if his emotions would not allow him to talk. "I've been in the hospital—three months—out of my head most of the time. Yesterday they took me home. Mortgage foreclosed. Everything going at auction! My wife is sick. They—say she may die. I'm out of business, do you hear! Down and out! That's what you big men try to do, push us little fellows out, crush us, kill us! You big concerns with all your money. Cornering all the valuable stock, making us pay the price for it!" A sudden look of cruel cunning crept into his mad eyes. "But there's something your dollars can't get you now—and that's the chance to do it again!"

With a quick clutch at the pocket of his ragged coat he brought out a revolver and pointed it, with a snarl, at John. His hand held it unsteadily. He groped crazily for the trigger.

John Dorning let out an exclamation of terror. He cried, "Rodrigo!"

"Shut up!" Rodrigo cut in savagely, at the same time walking quickly, boldly up to Rosner, staring steadily into the madman's eyes.

"Stand still," cried Rosner, but his hand and his voice were wavering. He looked almost pleadingly at Rodrigo. "If you m—move again, I'll shoot."

"No, you won't," said Rodrigo calmly, clearly. "Rosner, if you pull that trigger, what will become of your wife and children?" With a stealthy, quick movement he pushed John Dorning behind him. Rosner made a half-hearted effort to resist as Rodrigo seized his wrist in a clutch of steel and knocked the gun out of the man's weak fingers. Rodrigo put the revolver in his own pocket and, the tension over, stood regarding Rosner with a look of infinite pity. Then the reaction hit the broken man with full force and, suddenly crumpling into a chair, he covered his face with his hands and his thin body was shaken with hacking, convulsive sobs.

John and Rodrigo stood looking at him in silence for a moment, and then Rodrigo said quietly, "You'd better speak to him, John."

Rosner had quieted a little now, and John put his hand upon his bent shoulder. "Don't worry, old man," he said. "I'm terribly sorry. It's a mistake all around. Dad and I would never have let this happen for the world,

had we been told anything about it. Forget the vase and the mortgage—and I'll lend you anything you want to see you through."

Rosner raised a haggard, tear-swollen face. "My wife," he whispered huskily, "is sick. And they told her I—I was out of my head."

John patted Rosner's shoulder. "Well, you're all right now, aren't you? Sure—fine."

"I'll telephone Bates, and Madison can see Rosner home and do anything necessary for his wife," Rodrigo suggested in an undertone to John.

"No, I'll go myself," John said. He helped the broken man to his feet and located his hat for him.

Dazed, but strangely sane again and hopeful, Rosner turned to John and said in an awed, puzzled voice, "I meant—to shoot." And, indicating Rodrigo, "It was him that stopped me. Oh, thank God!—thank God!"

He allowed John to lead him out of the office and stood waiting calmly outside for a moment while John went for his own hat. Dorning darted back, a moment later, to Rodrigo. Still flushed with excitement, he held out his hand, his eyes expressing his full heart. "Rodrigo!"

Rodrigo took his hand. "We think we've got our problems, but they don't amount to a thing, do they?—not a thing," he said thoughtfully.

"It's my life—that I owe—" John began.

But Rodrigo stopped him. "Forget it," he advised. "Nobody knows what happened, and

nobody needs to. There's just one thing I want you to promise—I want you to agree that we give Rosner a job here when he's fit to work again."

John smiled. "I was thinking of the same thing myself. I'll tell him about it on the way to his home."

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

"I DARE YOU TO KISS ME—AND LET ME GO?" ELISE BREATHED.

CHAPTER XIV

One summery September morning, a month later, John Dorning, gloom written on his face, walked into Rodrigo's office and laid a letter ruefully upon his desk.

"The dread summons has come," John announced. "Ferris wants me to be in Philadephia in the morning. The painting and pieces are there and he wants to see me about arranging them and having placques made and all that sort of thing. What a bore! That's the annoying part of this business, Rodrigo—when you've made a sale, your troubles have just begun. Your customers know so little about what they're buying that you have to take it home for them and keep it dusted and—oh, it's a nuisance."

Still fussing, John left for Greenwich early that afternoon, intending to go all the way home and return to New York to catch the midnight train for Philadelphia, rather than miss the precious hours with Elise.

The afternoon following John's departure brought two unexpected developments. Rodrigo received a long telegram from his partner. The painstaking Ferris wished estimates at

once upon some new specimens of Italian sculpture. He also desired to see new models. John suggested that Rodrigo secure both at once and meet him at his hotel in Philadelphia early the next morning. He indicated that competitors were interested in the new proposition and that there was consequently need for both secrecy and haste.

Rodrigo hurried out of the office. He would have to secure some of the desired pieces from a certain private collection, which he was quite sure could be purchased on the spot.

He was, as a result, not present when Elise appeared in the establishment of Dorning and Son about three o'clock in the afternoon.

The wife of John Dorning occasioned frank glances of admiration from her husband's staff as she walked gracefully through the exhibition rooms and into John's office. She was looking marvelously well in her new, svelte fall costume, and she was quite aware of it. John Dorning's money permitted her to give her striking beauty an adequately luxurious setting.

She was not sorry to find Mary Drake alone in her husband's office. She was curious to make a more intimate study of this pretty blond girl, whom she had previously noticed and spoken to but casually. For John had indiscreetly shared Rodrigo's love secret with his wife. Though there had been a tacit agreement between the men that Rodrigo's regard for Mary was to be held in confidence, John had

quite innocently told Elise about it. Were they not equally interested in seeing their friend happy? John had, of course, not noticed Elise's face turn cloudy for an instant as he related the news to her.

Elise now concealed her real feeling toward Mary Drake behind a voice of almost excessive sweetness as she asked, "Is Count Torriani outside the building?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dorning. But he will probably be back at any moment."

"I shall wait here then—if you don't mind," Elise said quietly, settling herself down comfortably in the chair beside the desk, while Mary resumed her work of opening John's afternoon mail.

For several minutes, Elise carefully considered the delicate-faced girl before her. What did Rodrigo see in this pale creature? Good Lord, he couldn't be serious. She felt a resentment against Mary, a feeling of enmity that was really a rising jealousy. As the moments passed, she suddenly was seized with a desire to crush her,——

"I understand from Mr. Dorning that you and Count Torriani are good friends—something more, perhaps, than just—secretary and employer?" Elise said suddenly, striving with an effort to keep the suavity in her voice and make what she had resolved to say sound as casual and friendly as possible.

Mary looked up with a start, her eyes ques-

tioning and a faint pink suffusing her cheeks.

"I hope you won't misunderstand what I have to say or think me impertinent," Elise went on. "You have been associated with Mr. Dorning so long that I feel that you are almost one of our family." Elise forced a smile, striving to disarm the disconcerted Mary. "From several things Mr. Dorning has told me, I gather that Count Torriani has been very attentive to you in—a social way?"

Mary rose and faced Elise coldy. "Mrs. Dorning, I do not care——"

"I assure you I have the best intentions in the world," Elise cut in quickly. "I understand you have not encouraged Count Torriani. In that, you show your excellent sense. Nevertheless, I know Count Torriani so well that I feel I must warn you further. He is not what people call—a marrying man. And I don't believe that you are the sort of girl who would care to——"

"Mrs. Dorning, please!" Mary cried sharply. Then she relaxed a little her tense attitude. John had so often sung the praises of his sweet, unselfish wife. Perhaps she *was* misjudging Elise's motives. She faltered in a more conciliatory tone, "You mean to be kind, of course, but——"

"I do, I do. Mr. Dorning and I have seen so much unhappiness caused by Rodrigo's impulsiveness and thoughtlessness. And you seem so much above the average type."

"Thank you," said Mary. Hurt, outraged, she yet managed to be calm. "But I can assure you that you need distress yourself no further on my account."

"I must—even at the risk of making you angry at me. Of course, John and Rodrigo have always been close friends, almost like brothers. Even in that dreadful Sophie Binner mess, John stood by him. Rodrigo is in many ways a fine man, but he has the continental ideas of love, you know. He scoffs at our American worship of faithfulness. He has been the hero of so many affairs, known so many worldly women, that I am sure the thought of marriage has never entered his head. He could never settle down and make a wife happy."

"You misjudge him—you must!" Mary said hoarsely, but her defense did not even convince herself. Elise was but putting into brutal words the answer Mary herself did not want to give to the questions which had been agitating her mind and heart for months. And who could say that Elise's answer was not the true one? The past of Rodrigo was undeniable. And what proof was there, Mary forced herself to ask, that he had not been playing with her too?

"You are so invaluable here," Elise went on caressingly. "It would be a shame if—that is, Rodrigo would be the first to blame himself if his thoughtlessness compelled you to——"

But in that veiled threat, Elise went just a little too far. Amid the confusion in Mary Drake's mind came a flash of intuition. She relaxed her tense posture and stared at Elise quietly. She understood what the wife of John Dorning was driving at now—what it meant to her own relations with Rodrigo. Mary made a sudden radical decision.

She said quietly to Elise, "I understand you, Mrs. Dorning. I understand both Count Torriani—and you. In any case I am leaving—at the end of the week."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Elise replied sympathetically, striving to keep the relief out of her voice. She had accomplished her purpose far more completely and with less effort than she had anticipated. This puritanical miss, she had realized, must be eliminated. And now, it developed, the good angel was eliminating herself.

Both women looked up quickly as the door opened to admit Rodrigo. Without a word Mary turned and walked out past him with such a white and troubled countenance that his eyes turned grave and followed her questioningly. When he shifted them to Elise, there was a glint of accusation in their dark depths, though he said nothing about Mary. Instead he greeted the wife of his friend with a colorless "This is a surprise."

"Is it?" she asked in a voice of velvet, resolving to humor him. "I am merely following

John's instructions. He said you were to take me to tea, dinner, and the concert at Aeolian Hall later."

"That was before the old boy telegraphed me all this extra work," he said with affected good nature. What the devil, he was asking himself, had she said to Mary—if anything? He said to Elise pointedly, indicating the bulging brief case he laid upon the desk, "I'll have to work here every minute on this stuff until I catch the midnight train for Philadelphia, if I'm to have things shipshape bright and early in the morning as John instructed."

Her face clouded with annoyance. What an evasive, exasperating man he was. But the very fact that he was going to such lengths to avoid being alone with her only added stimulus to the game for Elise. "You're really going to stay in this stuffy place until midnight?" she asked casually.

"I'm afraid I'll have to," he replied. "Please don't think I'm a boor or anything of that sort, Elise. I should like nothing better than to spend the rest of the day and evening with you, but—some other time."

"Why didn't you answer my letter inviting you to Greenwich for the week-end?"

"Because I received a wire from John that he wasn't returning until the following Monday," he said sharply. "And I naturally supposed you had received the same information and that it automatically cancelled the invitation."

A little smile played around her lips and she said softly, "What a safe and sane and altogether good person you have developed into, Rodrigo." She picked up her purse from the table and rose slowly to her feet. "Well, I suppose I can call Rita Corson or somebody. You're sure you are playing the business slave?"

"I'm sorry," he bowed. "Some evening soon we'll make it a foursome with John and you and Mary and me."

"How interesting," she smiled, and he saw her to the door.

He watched her wending her serene way down the deserted aisle to the street door, then picked up his brief case and went into his own office. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps and judged correctly that it was Mary returning to her sanctum for her coat and hat. He unbuckled his brief case and took out of it a slender book bound in blue and gold. He walked quickly out through the main room and into the office marked "John Dorning." Mary was seated at John's desk staring into space, her eyes a little moist and red.

"I've found the book we were talking about the other evening, Mary," he said cheerfully. "'The Anonymous Sonnets.' I located it in Dobell's collection."

She summoned an answering smile, but her voice was dull as she said. "You have a treasure then. It's very rare."

He came closer. "It isn't for me, Mary. I intended it for your birthday to-morrow."

"It must have cost a fortune, Rodrigo—I can't accept it," she replied in a low voice.

He looked at her blankly. "But why not? What's wrong, Mary?"

"I hope you won't think me ungrateful. But circumstances have developed—that make it necessary for me to leave my position here at the end of the week—or at least as soon you can get someone to replace me."

"Nonsense," he cried impulsively. "I know —someone has been talking to you. But I'm not going to let you go." He suddenly felt happiness sweeping away from him, darkness closing in, all that he held dear escaping him. He clutched at her hand and cried quickly, pleadingly, "Mary! You can't! I need you— I love you! I want you to be my wife." She looked at him, startled, frightened, afraid to trust herself to speak. Emotion surged from him, "Oh, haven't you seen how much I cared?" Then, a light and a terrible forecast of disaster dawning, "Have you been afraid of this? Is that why you're leaving?"

"Please, Rodrigo," she almost whispered. "I'm grateful—and honored—but——"

"Don't say that yet, Mary. I've so much to tell you. So much that you must believe."

She looked at him now with clear, resigned eyes. She said quietly, "Is there any use of it?"

"Not if you—couldn't love me. If you don't believe in my love, or that I could make you happy."

She replied slowly, "How I wish I could say to you, or put clearly to myself, all that is in my mind. I wish I dared listen to you. But it will be easier for both of us—the less there is to remember. Please let me go."

Despair crept into his voice as he answered her, "Perhaps you have condemned me already. Is that what you mean?"

She said proudly, "You don't understand. If I was sure I loved a man, and wanted to marry him, it would be for what he meant to me, not what he had meant to other women." He started eagerly to interrupt, but she held up her hand. "But even if you were that man," she said firmly, "I wouldn't say 'yes.' It would only mean unhappiness for both of us—in the end. We are not meant for each other."

"But why?—why?" he cried.

She replied, "I cannot tell you."

"It's unjust. Unfair! You're denying me—and perhaps yourself—the greatest happiness in the world, and giving no reason for it."

"Please!" she cried, as he seemed about to sweep her into his arms, to crush out all of her doubts and questionings. "There is so much unnecessary suffering in the world. Let us spare ourselves any needless pain. I mean what I have said—and please believe that I am sorry—for both of us."

He followed her with stricken, beaten eyes as she slowly walked into her office and took her hat and coat.

"Good-bye, Mary," he said as calmly as he could.

"Good-bye," she said. "I shall be in in the the morning—as usual."

As usual! When she had gone, he flung himself into John's chair and put his head into his arms, pressing his fingers into his forehead to crush out the pain that was there. He remained thus for half an hour, unable to think, to move, aching in body and soul. Then, gradually, a reaction set in. Why had he to suffer so? Why had the only pure love he had ever had in his life been cast aside as if it were something presumptuous, unclean?

He forced himself to his feet and walked into his own office, hardly knowing what he was doing, and, spreading the papers from his brief case out upon his desk, he tried to work on the new estimates for Dorning. He was starting to pity himself now, and gradually a fierce resentment, not against Mary—for he still loved Mary—but against the whole scheme of things, the world with its petty moral code, seized him. He laughed aloud, and it echoed very unpleasantly through the vacant office. Bah! What was the use of burying his past, when the past had arisen from its coffin to mock him at the critical moment. Bah! Why deny one's self pleasures, why fight against women like Elise,

why try to change the leopard's spots when the world chose to think them blacker than they really were?

He tossed his pencil down impatiently and took to pacing the office. A mad, reckless mood was coming upon him that he could not control. It was after nine o'clock when finally he forced himself back into his chair, his mind having been wrenched into a semblance of order, and resumed his labors upon the report.

He did not hear the light tap upon his door. It was not until the door softly opened and quietly closed again that he became aware that a second person was in the room.

CHAPTER XV

Elise was standing just inside the door, smiling at him from the shadows.

She had changed her costume. A gauzy black wrap covered her black evening gown, from which her white shoulders could be seen rising. Her small, tight-fitting black hat was draped with black lace that shaded her eyes almost with the effect of a mask. She was quite aware of the impression she made as she stood there silently. The tired man raised his eyes and stared at her. Then he pulled his long, handsome body out of the chair and arose questioningly.

At length she approached him and said lightly, "Ah, you are a man of your word after all. I was afraid the work was just a bluff."

"Why have you come back?" he asked almost sharply from behind the table. "You must go at once."

"Oh, don't be annoyed, Rodrigo. No one saw me come in. I have a private key to the place, you know. Please don't begrudge me the innocent pleasure of doing something slightly clandestine." She came near to the chair opposite him, and went on, "And now that I am here,

won't you be a polite host and ask me to sit down?" Without waiting for the invitation, she took the chair, laying aside her wrap as she did so.

He sank into the chair opposite and rustled the papers uneasily.

"I haven't had dinner yet, Rodrigo," she suggested. "I thought that if I came back you might relent and take me to dinner. In fact, I was so sure of it that I dashed up to Aunt Helen's and changed my gown."

He was silent for a moment, and then he raised his head suddenly and, looking her in the eyes, said, "I'm sorry you came back, and I won't take you to dinner. But now that you are here, it's as good a time as any to talk certain things out that are bound to come up sooner or later."

She made a wry little face, cupped her finely ovaled chin in her hands, and smiled at him. "Heavens, Rodrigo, I believe you, of all men, are about to preach to me. Please don't, I beg of you! Remember that I am the wife of a man who is somewhat of a preacher."

"Leave John out of it," he returned. "He's altogether too good for either of us to discuss. You and I understand each other, Elise. I am quite aware of the game you have been playing. I——"

She cut in with an unpleasant little laugh. She rather enjoyed his violent seriousness.

"So—I have been playing a game," she encouraged him.

"Yes. You married John for his money. You wanted to marry me until you discovered that I was poor."

She was not offended. "Why didn't you warn your best friend then, if you saw through my purpose so clearly?" she asked calmly.

"What chance did I have to warn him? He was head over heels in love with you at once, and it was too late. It would have half killed the poor chap to tell him the truth. I had to let him make his mistake."

Her smile left her face and her eyes darkened. "No, I will not let you say that," she replied earnestly. "I will grant you that I married John chiefly for his money. I admire him—but I have never loved him. And I *did* outwit you, my friend. You made a very clever attempt to show John what an error he was making in falling in love with me, but I forestalled you. And that was quite a feat, Rodrigo, for you are usually rather keen in matters of that sort.

"But I *have* made John happy. He tells me that fifty times a day—fifty times too many! One does not enjoy having it drummed into one that one is an angel. I have taken his money and his love, but I have been faithful to him and I have made him a good wife. Now I think I have earned the right to a little something for myself."

He stared at her tensely. "What do you mean, Elise?" he asked.

Her manner lost its hardness, and she leaned toward him.

"I *had* to marry the wrong man, Rodrigo," she said softly. "My whole existence has had its foundation in money. But it hasn't made me happy. I have been miserable ever since my marriage. It hasn't made me stop—loving you!"

"Elise—no! You mustn't say that," he cried, and rose swiftly to his feet.

She had risen too as she said, "I won't believe that you are as surprised as you pretend to be. You must have guessed it plainly enough many times. I think that we were meant for each other and that a few words spoken by a minister is not going to keep us apart. I will ask John for a divorce if you wish, and marry you. I will do anything—but I will not go on living a lie."

He stared at her, fascinated, wondering if he had heard her aright. Had some malignant fate brought her and her confession to him at the precise moment when Mary had abandoned him?

He said slowly, "You will *have* to go on. You are mad to think of anything else. I will go away at once, home to Italy. I had planned to go over there this fall anyway. But I will change my plans, and not return."

She laughed. "And you think that I am

innocent enough to believe that would be the only reason for your departure. Mary Drake has evidently told you that she is leaving here also."

He started, suspicion dawning in his eyes. He asked, "Mary has told you that? You must have spoken to her about me first. What did you say to her?"

"Yes, I spoke to her about you. I told her the truth. I told her that she could never be happy with you, that you are not the sort to stay contented with such a wife. And I think she agreed with me. She is a very sensible girl. There are certain traits in your character, Rodrigo, that a girl like Mary could never reconcile herself to."

He returned fiercely, "That's rot! If there's anything about me that Mary could object to, it's long since passed. I'm through with my past forever. No woman in the world means a thing to me but Mary."

Her answer was to come close to him and say softly, "You have lost Mary forever, Rodrigo. In your heart you know it. And in your heart you know that what you have just said is nonsense. I dare you to test it. I dare you to hold me in your arms and repeat it. I dare you to kiss me—and then let me go!"

He caught her hand. "Elise, are you crazy!" But he did not relinquish her hand, until her arms had slipped slowly around his neck and her lips were very close to his.

"Why do we pretend any longer, you and I?" she murmured. "You are not like John or Mary. You are only chasing thin, white shadows when you try to fashion yourself after them." And with a swift movement of her head she had kissed him.

He cried, "No—no! You must go—please."

"I love you." And she clung to him.

Fascinated, harassed, he did not resist her any longer. He took her into his arms and buried her face in his kisses.

When at last he let her go, she still held him close and said almost in a whisper, "We will go to the Van Clair, Rodrigo, and dine high up on the roof, near the stars. You can go to your appointment afterward. No one will know—or care."

"Except our own souls."

"I don't believe we have any," she said, with a queer little note of solemnity. "I think this life, this happiness, is all—and we must take it while we may."

He kissed her again, completely under her spell, and then he said tensely, "Go now, Elise. I will finish here, and I will meet you in fifteen minutes at the Van Clair."

Obediently she secured her wrap from the table, flung it about her and started for the door.

She smiled back at him, whispering, "In fifteen minutes, Rodrigo." And just as she closed the door, "I love you."

He turned, his emotions running riot within him, back to the papers on his desk. For ten minutes he tried in vain to work. Then, with a gesture of helplessness, he started tossing the papers into his brief case. He had risen and taken his hat when the telephone rang.

It was John.

"Did you line up the stuff, Rodrigo?" came Dorning's distant voice. "I took a chance on finding you at the office. I wanted to make sure to-night that everything was all right and you were coming down here, because Hodge and Story's representative just got in and is all set to take the business away from us."

John! It was like the voice of a rescuing angel. Rodrigo with an effort composed himself and replied, "Everything is fine, John, and I'm taking a train in half an hour."

"Great," said the voice on the wire. "And Elise—did you have dinner with her? Have you seen her?"

Rodrigo replied, "No."

By the time he had hung up the receiver he had made his decision. Elise's spell was broken, broken by that trusting voice on the wire. He would not even telephone her that he was not coming to her. He could not trust himself to talk with her. If she were desperately offended, so much the better!

He seized his brief case and hat and made for the door and a taxi-cab.

CHAPTER XVI

Rodrigo flung himself into his berth on the midnight train to Philadelphia with no idea of sleep. One resolve kept pounding in his head. He would tell John Dorning everything when he saw him, and then he would clear out. He heard people shuffling in the aisle outside of his curtained resting place. They were addressing the porter and each other in that hoarse penetrating whisper that passengers affect on sleeping cars with the mistaken idea that it does not disturb the sleepers. He became conscious of the train getting under way with clanging bell and dashing about of human feet on the cement platform. For half the journey across the flats of New Jersey he was awake. Then, emotionally and physically exhausted, he fell into a doze.

Crisp, sunshiny weather greeted him as he stepped out into Broad Street, Philadelphia, some hours later. It had the effect of clearing his brain. The world was rolling along cheerfully, unconcerned, after all. Ferris and the other members of the library committee were already in session with John when Rodrigo appeared at Ferris's office.

John had the opportunity for only a word or two with his partner privately before the conference went into session. "Did you go to dinner and the concert with Elise?" Dorning asked eagerly. When Rodrigo shook his head in the negative, John frowned a little and went on dolefully, "Gad, how I miss her. Whatever the consequence, I'm not going to leave her again. I'll bring her along, no matter how bored she gets."

It seemed to Rodrigo in that instant that it would be nothing short of murder to shatter this man's dream. He simply couldn't do it, at least not for the present.

Nor was he any nearer to his confession that evening as John sat opposite him in the dining car on the way back to New York. John was elated. They had closed the contract successfully and he was going back to Elise. He chided Rodrigo several times with being so preoccupied. They parted at Grand Central Station, John having two minutes in which to catch the Greenwich-bound train.

Mary Drake was putting flowers in a vase on his desk when Rodrigo arrived at his office the next morning. She frequently did this, but considering the circumstances surrounding their last conversation, he was a little surprised to find her there. Nevertheless he greeted her gravely and stood standing until she would have finished her task and departed. But he became gradually aware that she was using the flowers

as a subterfuge, that she did not intend to leave until she had spoken to him.

Mary said, with the air of a person who has been thinking something over for some time and is having some difficulty in expressing exactly what she means, "Rodrigo—there is something I should like to say." And, though he offered her no encouragement, she continued. "I have come to the conclusion that I was not as wise the last time I spoke to you as I thought I was. I have been thinking it over ever since. I *was* unjust to you. I belittled my feelings toward you. And I said there was a reason why we could never marry, and I didn't do you the justice to tell you what it was."

"I don't think telling me now will help either of us," he replied, striving to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Things have changed for me since then. I over-estimated myself. I told you I was a better man—than I am. To-day I see clearly that I was a fool."

She asked, suddenly apprehensive, "Something—that has taken away your love for me?"

His reply was bitter. "No, my faith in myself. Night before last, I weakened so that I don't deserve anybody's love, least of all, yours."

She recovered, smiled and came nearer to him, bravely intending to comfort him. "You are too hard on yourself, Rodrigo. You are angry and bitter. And that is my fault, I know."

"No, you have nothing to do with it," he said almost brutally. "I am going away from here too, as soon as I can. I shall stay away, forever."

He was surprised at the response in her face. She seemed glad, relieved. She hastened to explain. "Oh, Rodrigo, don't you see that that clears things up for us, for you and me? That eliminates the barrier that stood between us? I did not have the heart to tell you I could never say I loved you as long as you remained with Dorning and Son, as long as you and John were so closely associated. And I did not dare suggest breaking off your friendship."

"John?" he asked, mystified. "What has John got to do with you and me?"

"Not John, but——"

"Elise?"

She hesitated, then, "Yes. If I admitted to you that I loved you, I would always have had her to fight. And I couldn't. She spoke to me about you day before yesterday, and I saw that she would do anything to prevent us loving each other. I did not believe what she said about you. But it showed me to what lengths she would go, and I was afraid. Fighting her would mean the end of your friendship with John, of your connection with Dorning and Son. Oh, I realize the grip she has upon John. If it came to a choice between you and her, you know which he would keep. And I was not sure what your feeling for me might turn to if I were the

cause of a break between you and John. Mrs. Dorning is clever, fascinating, and, I am afraid, quite relentless. I know her feelings toward you and how hard she has tried to——"

He cut in savagely, "Have I ever given you any reason to suppose that Elise and I——"

"No. Not you," she interrupted quietly. "I have overheard you talking to her on the telephone several times. I know how you have sought to avoid her. I can speak frankly about her to you, I think. You will know that I am not moved by jealousy or a desire to gossip or anything petty. But she has called John's office several times from the Van Clair Hotel, for instance, on occasions when she knew he was not here and was to meet her somewhere later. She has given me messages over the 'phone for him, and each time I heard voices laughing and shouting near her. One evening when I passed the Van Clair on the way to the subway, she got out of a taxi with a strange man and went in. That place had a bad reputation, you know. It is just as well for New York that is has burned down."

He stared at her, startled, and, striving to make the question casual. "There was a fire at the Van Clair? When?"

"Why, night before last, just after midnight. It was in all the papers. It burned to the ground."

Dismay gripped him, and he turned away quickly so that she could not see his face. At

once Mary read that it had something to do with her, and she laid her hand upon his shoulder, her face flushed and smiling.

She said softly, "Perhaps it was that fire, the feeling it brought that we never know what will happen, never realize how short a time we may have to rectify a mistake, that showed me how wrong I was day before yesterday. I love you, Rodrigo. I will be your wife—if you still want me."

He turned a stricken face to her. He was held in a sudden fear and foreboding. He had hardly heard what she had said. And he had no time to answer her, for the door of his office was flung violently open and John Dorning, excited, disheveled, burst upon them.

"Rodrigo!" he cried from the door. Then, coming forward, "Thank God. I found you here."

He looked so badly that Mary asked in alarm, "You're ill, John. Can I do anything for you?"

"Thank you, Mary—no," he answered, and gathering from his tone that he wished to be alone with his friend, she left quietly.

He almost ran up to Rodrigo. "Elise was not there when I got home, Rodrigo! She left no word of any kind. I've called up everybody. I can't find her."

Rodrigo sagged against the desk, as if struck a blow. He repeated dully, "Can't find—Elise?"

"No. Rodrigo, do you know where she is—

do you? I'm worried to death. Anything might happen to her in this town. Accidents—anything."

By this time, with a great effort, Rodrigo had recovered a semblance of control over himself. He spoke soothingly. "Oh, that's nonsense, John. Have you called her friends?"

"Everybody. I've been to the police. I've traced all the ambulance calls. I've found out about fatal fires, and there haven't been any, except one in some hotel. I've driven and telephoned all over town. People must think I'm crazy. I 'phoned Warren down at his place, and he's helping me search too." He ran his hands nervously through his damp, blond hair. He cried, "And I *will* go crazy, Rodrigo, if I don't get on track of her soon." He seized his friend's lapel and fixed wild eyes upon him. "You don't think she could have run away from me, left me without a word, do you? No, of course not. Not that. We loved each other too much." He fell to pacing the floor rapidly.

"There's probably some very obvious explanation of her absence," Rodrigo strove to soothe him, and himself. "There usually is. Have you called Mrs. Palmer?"

John turned abruptly, his whole expression changing to one of intense relief. "I'm an idiot!" he cried. "I never thought of *her*. My car's outside. I'll drive up there at once. Mrs. Palmer is ill, as a matter of fact. Perhaps she's taken a turn for the worse and Elise was called

there suddenly. I'll run right up." He snatched up his hat and was gone.

Hardly had the door closed when Rodrigo bounded to the clothes-tree and took the unread morning paper from his overcoat pocket. He sank into his chair and spread the sheet eagerly on the desk in front of him. There, in screaming black headlines, it leaped out at him:

VAN CLAIR FIRE VICTIM IS STILL UNIDENTIFIED

BODY OF WOMEN GUEST THOUGHT TO HAVE PERISHED IN HOTEL TRAGEDY HAS NOT BEEN FOUND

Up to an early hour this morning, the woman occupying the room on the ninth floor of the ill-fated Hotel Van Clair, which burned to the ground shortly after midnight Wednesday, remained unidentified, and no trace of her charred body had been found in the still smoking ruins. The hotel register, the only direct means of identification, has evidently burned and—

With a sudden cry of anguish, he crushed the paper violently between his hands, as if to destroy the devastating news it brought him. The sheet fell to the floor as he stretched his arms out in a gesture of hopelessness.

After a while he became aware of a hand upon

his shoulder, and Mary's voice was saying gently, "I heard John leave, so I came back. What is wrong?"

He felt himself crumpling. He leaned against her, raising his fear-stricken eyes to her. "Elise! She's gone. John has been looking for her. He's half crazy. But he'll never find her. I know." And, as her face remained questioning, "The paper says a woman has been burned. The woman was Elise—and I—I sent her there. She came back here that night and —well, she fascinated me. I forgot everything. I was to meet her later at the Van Clair. She left me to meet me there later. Then John telephoned long distance, about the business, and I came to my senses. I didn't go to the hotel. She must have stayed there. The fire broke out half an hour after she left me. So you see, Mary—I sent her there—I killed Elise! And I can never tell John—never!"

Growing horror gathered in her eyes. She whispered, "It is—horrible."

"I sent John away on a fool's errand. I had to have time to think."

She said tensely, "But you say she came back to you, here? It was her idea, your going to the hotel? I know—the fascination of her, Rodrigo. And she went there alone—"

"What difference does that make?" he said wildly. "What good that I came to my senses? I sent her there. And now John! Counting on me to see him through—me!"

"You must tell John," she said firmly.

"I can't!"

"It would be kinder than to let him live not knowing, always wondering and hoping. It's cowardly not to tell him."

"Tell him—that, because of me, his wife, his wife, whom he adored, is dead?"

"Not because of you—in spite of you."

Rodrigo answered her, calmer, now reasoning. "You don't realize how he loved her, set her up as a saint upon an altar. I could not tell him the truth. It would blacken her forever before the whole world. I think he would prefer suffering any torture rather than that."

"That is a compromise, Rodrigo, and, therefore, wrong."

He said excitedly: "Call it what you please —I can't tell him!"

"Not even if I promise to help you with all the love I am capable of? Don't you see, Rodrigo?—I feel guilty with you. If I had not been so blind before, this might not have happened." She held out her hands, pleading with him, "Oh, Rodrigo, I love you. I did not realize how much until now. I can forgive everything in you—but cowardice. I will stand by you—but please, *please* tell John and ask him to forgive you. You can't see him through with that guilt always before you. It's impossible."

But he reiterated stubbornly. "No, I cannot tell him. I cannot kill him too. I would rather kill myself."

She asked quietly, "Not even if it means my love for you? Will you kill that too?"

He replied slowly, "There's nothing—could make me tell him." His voice was unsteady, his eyes blinded with tears as he turned away from her, her whole body drooping.

The telephone shrilled like a crack of doom, and he fumblingly lifted the receiver as she waited.

"She hasn't been here, Rodrigo!" came John's anguished voice. "What am I to do? I don't know——"

"Don't lose your nerve, old man," Rodrigo replied, and his tones were weak, almost unrecognizable.

"I'm at my wits' end. I've questioned her aunt, the servants here, everybody."

"Come on back down here then, old man," urged Rodrigo. "We'll work out a plan. Don't worry. I'll be here waiting. Come right down."

He hung up the receiver, staring ahead of him, seeming unconsicous that Mary was still there. When he became aware of her, he said as steadily as his trembling body allowed, "We'll all be upset terribly—for a while. Please—you will carry on temporarily, try to keep the place going, help us, won't you?"

She answered, "Yes, I will carry on. Don't worry about business. It will be all right." And her eyes too were full of tears.

CHAPTER XVII

Rodrigo sat on the edge of a chair in the living room of Henry Dorning's house at Greenwich. Near him, his frail body sunk deeply in the cushions of a large chair especially comfortably upholstered for his benefit, rested Henry Dorning. The attitude of both was one of nervous expectancy. Had you, however, been unacquainted personally with the two men and been told that one of them was a semi-invalid, you might have been excused for choosing Rodrigo as the ailing one. His lean face had grown thinner and his eyes were dark-ringed from the ordeal he was passing through. His clothing showed little trace of his usual sartorial fastidiousness. He fidgeted in his chair, and when he attempted to light a cigarette the match was held so unsteadily that the tobacco with difficulty caught fire. Henry Dorning, on the other hand, though affected very deeply by the plight of his son, maintained a surface calm that belied the turmoil within him.

Indeed, Henry Dorning was at somewhat of a loss to understand the extreme havoc which the disappearance of Elise had wrought in Rodrigo Torriani. He knew that the friendship be-

tween John and Rodrigo was so close that the catastrophe which had befallen his son would be shared by his son's friend. But, after all, Rodrigo was a man of the world, of considerable experience in emotional crises. Why had another's tragedy now broken him up so savagely that he seemed upon the verge of a breakdown? Had not more vital matters been pressing, Henry Dorning would have liked to discover the answer to this question.

As for John Dorning, his mad search for his missing wife had, in the physical sense, terminated for the time being. It had now been two weeks since the fatal fire in the Van Clair. The wild rushing about and pursuit of false clews, the almost total loss of sleep and food had caused John's frail body and almost his strong mind, to snap definitely that morning. For days Rodrigo had been warning him, urging him to abandon the search temporarily, tried with everything in his power, except the uttering of the truth about Elise, to prevent John from becoming a second victim. That morning John had collapsed in Rodrigo's arms and lain in the latter's apartment unconscious. Rodrigo had summoned a doctor and revived his friend. On the physician's advice, he had brought the stricken man at top speed in his car to Henry Dorning's home in Greenwich.

John had slumped, apparently more dead than alive, in the seat beside Rodrigo throughout that rapid ride. John's father and sister

A Paramount Picture. *Cobra.*

"DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW WHAT I THINK OF YOU?" MARY ASKED SOFTLY.

Alice, apprised in advance by telephone, had been awaiting their arrival. The tortured man, at last too weak to protest further, had been put to bed and the Dorning's family physician summoned.

The latter was now up with the sick man, as was Alice Pritchard. Henry Dorning and Rodrigo were at present waiting for the report upon John's condition.

"Hotchkiss is a long time about his examination," Henry Dorning said finally, breaking a long silence. He had been observing Rodrigo narrowly, and he thought perhaps occupying the Italian's mind with conversation might allay some of Rodrigo's evident nervousness. Otherwise he feared Dr. Hotchkiss might have another patient on his hands when he came downstairs.

Rodrigo nodded shortly.

"It is a blessing, in a way, that John has given out at last," Mr. Dorning went on seriously. "This break was bound to come. I could not stop his frantic search. Neither could you, I suppose. Now he will be kept quiet and will have a chance to recover." He was silent a moment, and then he asked suddenly, "Rodrigo, do you think Elise will ever be found?"

Rodrigo turned his tired eyes quickly to his questioner. "Why—I don't know," he faltered. "But I don't believe—she will."

"Nor do I," said Henry Dorning. "I think

she ran away from my boy, and, in doing so, met with a fatal accident somewhere, probably in a motor car. That is my own theory, but of course I have nothing on which to base it. It is merely intuition."

"But she and John were so happy together, loved each other so dearly. Why should she run—"

"Nonsense," the elder Dorning said shortly. "John loved her with all his heart. But I have thought from the first that she had no especial regard for him. I diagnosed her at once as a selfish, frivolous woman. She married John for his money, after carefully sizing the situation up and deciding that I probably would not live very long. Oh, I know that is a brutal way of talking about a woman who is probably dead now. But I cannot help it. I always distrusted her and feared for what she would do to John. A number of her actions confirmed my first suspicions. I was never one to interfere in the private affairs of my children—both Alice and John will tell you that. But I could not help but notice how, for example, Elise would disappear the moment John had left on a business trip and not come back to Greenwich until a few hours before his return. And the type of people she brought into his house—riff-raff is the only word for them.

"Yes, Rodrigo—I may be a terrible old ogre for saying so—but I am glad that woman has gone. I do not, of course, wish her dead. I am

afraid, however, that is what has happened. Otherwise she would certainly have communicated with John in some way by this time. You will remember that I had Warren ask you once what you knew of Elise. He said that you told him nothing. I am not going to question you, Rodrigo—now. But I will say that I believe you knew what sort of woman she really was and that you were afraid to tell John, because he was so infatuated with her that it would hurt him. I respect you for that and think you did wisely. I also respect you for trying to protect her when Warren questioned you. Any gentleman would have done the same, and I was foolish and a little caddish for having the question asked. However——"

But Rodrigo was never to know into what deep waters Henry Dorning's line of thought might have led them, for at that moment Dr. Hotchkiss appeared on the stairs and both men turned expectantly. The doctor was a splendid figure of a man, tall, gray and distinguished looking. He was a personal friend of Henry Dorning's as well as his medical advisor. His face now bore a grave expression that confirmed the fears of the patient's two best male friends.

Dr. Hotchkiss approached Rodrigo, who had risen and taken a step or two forward in his anxiety, and the still seated Henry Dorning, whose condition made it imperative that he walk only when necessary. The doctor said

quietly, "There is no use in minimizing things. John is in a very serious condition. He is physically and mentally exhausted. I have telephoned for a nurse. It is too big a job for Alice, willing as she is. I don't want either of you to disturb John. I don't want anybody to go near him, except the nurse, until further instructions from me. To speak frankly, any kind of a shock now would bring on—well, something I don't want to contemplate. It will be a long hard pull, I can tell you, to bring him around. And I want you both—and Alice too—to cooperate with me by assuring John absolute quiet during the next weeks and months."

The two listeners nodded. There was a faint feeling of relief in their minds that Dr. Hotchkiss had not pronounced matters hopeless and had even implied that with good fortune and care John might come through satisfactorily.

When the medical man had left, Rodrigo prepared to follow him. He shook hands with Henry Dorning and received the latter's promise to inform him at once if there was any decided change in John's condition.

"As for continuing the search for Elise—you may use your own judgment about that," said Henry Dorning. "I suppose John would wish it pursued with the same zeal. But I leave it to you."

"Very well," Rodrigo replied softly. "I will use—my own judgment."

He drove back to New York at a snail's pace, the speed of his car in harmony with his thoughts of the long, dreary months of remorse ahead of him.

The next day Rodrigo tried hard to submerge himself in the numerous details of business that made up his work and John's with Dorning and Son. It was the only way now that he could stand by his stricken friend. Mary Drake was his able lieutenant—a silent, rather impersonal sort of lieutenant, to be sure, but he could expect nothing different now, he grimly told himself.

An alarming week followed at the Dorning home in Greenwich. For two or three days John's condition was very bad. There were periods in which he alternately raved in hysteric delirium and then sank into a coma, recognizing nobody and sustained by a scarcely detectable heart-beat. In his periods of delirium he called loudly upon Elise, upon Rodrigo, upon the mother who had died in his childhood, while the nurse, Alice Pritchard, and Doctor Hotchkiss labored with physical strength and opiates to quiet him. In that week, Rodrigo lived through a hundred hells, calling on the telephone every few hours to receive bulletins that sank his heart anew each time.

At the end of the week he learned from the doctor that John's physical condition had taken a slight turn for the better. Mentally, how-

ever, he was very bad. Dr. Hotchkiss indicated his fears that, unless the strain were in some way removed, his young patient's mind might go.

In disposing of the increased business worries placed upon his shoulders by the absence of John, Rodrigo found unexpectedly efficient assistance in the person of Max Rosner. For Rodrigo had taken a practical means of making good John's promise that something would be done for Rosner, after the dramatic encounter in which Rodrigo had saved his friend from the leaden danger in Rosner's revolver. John had advanced the little man a loan and placed his ill wife in the hospital. Rodrigo had suggested a way for the harassed little man to repay the money and regain his self-respect. John's responsibilities in Dorning and Son had always been too heavy. Rodrigo suggested the installation of Rosner as John's assistant, pointing out that while the ex-employee was no executive, he knew the business and would doubtless prove very acceptable in a subordinate capacity.

During the time Rosner was winning back his health and mental balance, his duties had been light. In the weeks just before Elise's disappearance, he had gradually been given larger responsibilities and had been executing them surprisingly well. Now, with John gone, he stepped manfully into the breach and performed yeoman service in enabling Rodrigo to

carry on. Henry Madison was his usual capable self in managing the retail sales force; however, without the aid of Rosner, Rodrigo frequently told himself that the buying and important outside contract work of the concern, the part of the business on which the reputation of Dorning and Son rested, would have gone to pieces.

Moreover, Rodrigo discovered in Rosner, whom he had hiterto regarded with some distaste, personal qualities and a sympathy that made him really like the frail middle-aged man and established a bond between them.

It started in the second week of John's illness when Rosner, who fairly worshipped Rodrigo now for the kindness he had done him, said timidly at the end of a business conference, "How is John this morning?"

"Improving a little, as rapidly as anybody could expect."

Rosner continued hesitantly, "You're not looking at all well yourself, Count Torriani. You're worrying too much about John. It's time you thought about yourself a little. If you don't—well, you may be where he is."

"Would to God that I were!" Rodrigo cried with a suddenness and vehemence that startled Rosner. In the next instant he was angry at himself for losing control, for his manifestation of the jumpy state of his nerves. He continued more calmly, "Thanks for your sym-

pathy, Rosner, but don't worry about me. I'm all right."

"If you wanted to go away a while, for a rest—I could manage, I think, after a fashion," Rosner offered.

"Thanks. I know you could. You're doing wonderful work—you and Miss Drake and all the rest of the people. But I'll stick around until John gets back in harness. Then I'm going away for a long rest, abroad probably."

After Rosner had gone, Rodrigo realized that their little conversation had been a relief, even his explosive demonstration of his nervous condition. The only other person in the establishment with whom he discussed John's illness was Mary Drake, and to her he merely communicated briefly the latest news from Greenwich daily, in answer to her question. There was no mention of their former relations to each other, merely a question and answer about some one in whom both felt a deep concern. Beyond this and the daily contacts into which the routine of the business brought them, Rodrigo and Mary were now to all intents and purposes just an employer and a trusted employee. Of the frequent anxious and sympathetic glances which Mary cast at him when he chanced to be facing away from her, Rodrigo, of course, knew nothing.

It was December, when his illness had run along for nearly two months, that John Dorning showed a definite improvement and return

to normal. One morning Rodrigo received word by telephone that John was to leave two days later for southern California, in charge of his sister and his nurse, and would like to see Rodrigo before he departed. The doctor had declared that a change of scene would help the patient as soon as he was in condition to travel. It was thought that John was now strong enough, and the plans had been made for an indefinite stay in the region of San Diego.

Rodrigo drove up to Greenwich that afternoon. Alice Pritchard ushered him into John's room, near a window at which his friend was seated, looking moodily out upon the snow-clad lawn. Though he was prepared to see a change in John's appearance, Rodrigo was shocked in spite of himself at the actuality. The face of the man in the chair was white and gaunt. His blond hair was streaked with gray. He looked at least ten years older than he had on the day Rodrigo had seen him last. And as, aware of visitors, he turned, Rodrigo saw that his eyes looked sunken and lack-lustre.

Rodrigo managed a smile as he advanced with hand outstretched. A semblance of a smile appeared on John's wan face also, and he said in a low voice, "This is good, old man."

"It is, indeed," Rodrigo said heartily. "I'm glad to see you looking better."

"Yes, I am feeling better. I want to thank you for sticking by me through it all, Rodrigo. They've told me of the constant interest you've

shown and the fine work you're doing at the shop. I'm sorry to have to impose upon you any longer—but they tell me I must go away for a time. I don't know that it will do any good." His weak voice fell away, and his head bowed a little.

"Oh, it's bound to," Rodrigo cut in cheerfully. "New faces, new scenes. You'll come back a new man, ready to pitch in like a whirlwind."

But John had hardly listened to him. Alice had left the room, as the patient discovered when he looked cautiously around. At once he caught Rodrigo's sleeve with his thin fingers and looked at him so pathetically that the latter wanted to turn his head away. John asked, "Have you learned anything at all about Elise, Rodrigo?" And when Rodrigo shook his head slowly, John's hand and head fell and he whispered, "Nothing—in all these months? It's unbelievable—it's maddening."

Rodrigo hastened to soothe him, to change the subject. A few moments later Alice returned with the nurse, and Rodrigo deduced that it was time that he left. The two men shook hands and, with an encouraging caution to come back strong and healthy, Rodrigo was out of the room.

During the remainder of the winter, the word from California was of John's constant improvement. He was living almost in the open air and doing little besides eat and sleep. In

February he started writing short notes to Rodrigo in his own hand. By the first of March, the notes had grown longer and had lost both their unsteadiness of chirography and the perfunctory air of being written by a man too tired mentally to use his imagination.

John was taking an interest in life again. He took to commenting upon the beauty of the natural scenery about him and upon the desecration being wrought upon Nature by some of the architectural monstrosities of the region. He told in subsequent letters of having lunch with mutual business friends of theirs, of a trip to Catalina Island. He even made some inquiries about certain projects he had left unfinished upon the occasion of his abrupt leavetaking from Dorning and Son and urged Rodrigo to tell him in detail of his business problems of the hour. This last, to Rodrigo, was the most encouraging sign of all.

Early in April, John Dorning returned to Greenwich. Rodrigo spent the week-end there and rejoiced to see his friend looking so changed for the better. Though he was still thin and fragile-looking, there was color in his cheeks and life in his eyes. And whatever his mood might be when alone, in the presence of his family and of Rodrigo, John was now nearly his old self. He had, right at the start of Rodrigo's visit, made an effort to prove this by meeting his friend at the station in the Dorning sedan and driving him to the house. In

answer to Rodrigo's joyous greeting and eager questioning, he replied, "Yes, I'm in quite good shape now. In fact, Dr. Hotchkiss is so pleased with me that he says I may come in a couple of days next week for an hour or so each day and kind of get in touch with things at the shop. And I'll be glad to do it, I can tell you."

Though Rodrigo sensed somehow that the thought of the missing Elise still occupied the back of John Dorning's mind, to the exclusion of everything else, her name was not mentioned at all throughout the week-end.

Sunday morning, Rodrigo rode horseback with John, a pastime which Dr. Hotchkiss had recommended and which had led to the purchase of two excellent saddle-horses and their installation in the long empty Dorning barn. The bridle-path led them quite close to the Millbank development, where stood the vacant home of John and Elise. Rodrigo did not, of course, allude to this and even glanced anxiously at John as they passed the place.

"I am going over to my old house next week sometime and take out the stuff I left there." John said calmly, though Rodrigo wondered if there was not suppressed emotion behind those quiet words. "I have put the place on the market and intend to dispose of it." John was frowning and his lips were clenched tightly.

Rodrigo did not answer him, but soon afterward prodded his horse into a gallop. John fol-

lowed him, and they finished their journey at a very rapid pace. Rodrigo left for New York that evening, very much pleased with his friend's condition. Some of the heavy load was lifted off the young Italian's mind at last. Though he had not permitted himself to think about it during all the long months of that sad winter and early spring, he was utterly worn out in body and mind. On the rare occasions when he relaxed the grim guard upon his mind and was weak enough to pity himself, it seemed to him that soon he must, *must* get away.

No returning hero ever received a more sincere welcome from his associates than did John Dorning when he walked into the shop on Wednesday of the week following. The whole staff abruptly dropped what they were doing and clustered around him. Hands were outstretched and grasped. In many eyes there were tears. John, smiling happily, was very close to crying himself. He thanked them all collectively for carrying on in his absence, with special mention of Rodrigo, Henry Madison, Rosner and Mary Drake. The last named dabbed at her eyes furtively and stole a proud glance at Rodrigo, which he did not catch.

John remained scarcely half an hour, spending the time in a short conference with the four who composed the executive staff of the business. On Friday, however, he came in again, this time with a tentative sketch suggestion for the murals Dorning and Son were to submit

for a new art theatre building to be erected in New York. After this his appearance became steadily more frequent and for longer intervals.

Two weeks later, he said, at the end of the first full day he had spent at the shop. "Monday I intend to resume my place here in earnest, Rodrigo. I'm feeling well now, and I'm perfectly capable of putting on the harness. In fact, the harder I work, the better I feel. But *you've* been working too hard, Rodrigo. You're looking tired and seedy. I really believe I appear healthier than you do. Don't I, Mary?" The scene was John's office. Mary had just come in to take away the signed letters. She looked around and smiled at his question, flashing a glance at Rodrigo but not committing herself to an answer. "Mary has been a big help to me in getting back into the swim," John smiled. "And I intend to lean upon her more than ever." He looked so affectionately at the grave girl that Rodrigo glanced from one to the other and experienced a sudden flash of foreboding. John and Mary—now that Elise was gone—John's need of someone to lean upon—the realization, to him, of Mary's worth——

But Rodrigo dismissed it from his mind with an effort. He simply would not think of it. The ache of loving Mary was still too raw in his own heart.

"Why don't you take a long vacation, Rodrigo?" John was saying. "Go abroad, to Italy,

or something. You certainly deserve it. We'll carry on here."

And another portion of the heavy load on Rodrigo's mind lifted. He felt like sighing audibly with relief. At last he could put into effect the plan that had been forming in his brain ever since that awful morning. John was well now, reasonably happy, as happy as he perhaps ever would be again. The burden of keeping the faith by carrying on his business for him had been taken from Rodrigo's shoulders. The guilt in Rodrigo's soul could never be taken away, of course. But at least he could gain some surcease by going away from this man whom he could never again look in the eye with a clear conscience, never again see without feeling how he had betrayed him. He would go away, and stay away. When his heart cried, "But Mary?—You love Mary. You cannot give her up," he tried to stifle that cry, and resolved, just the same, to go.

He voiced this resolution to John. "I *do* need a vacation, John. I'm glad you suggested it. If you can get along without me, I think I shall book passage to Italy. My house over there is vacant, you know, and I want to see about selling it, for one thing. And I should like to see some of my old friends. And the Bay of Naples, and all the old places. It will do me good. And perhaps I can pick up some treasures over there at bargain prices. I'll keep that in mind too."

Rodrigo sailed four weeks later on a Saturday. John bade him good-bye at the close of the day's work on the afternoon previous, for John was under the doctor's orders to take two full days' vacation each week-end.

"When will you be back, Rodrigo?" John asked.

And Rodrigo had hesitated and finally answered, "I—can't tell."

"Well, take your time—but I'll be awfully eager to see you again. I'll miss you like the dickens," John said rather wistfully.

Rodrigo, his baggage already aboard, arrived early at the steamer that Saturday. In the midst of the passengers waving and calling to the swarms of friends standing in the doorways of the pier-sheds, he stood alone on the deck, looking ashore. He was probably the only one there to whom someone was not wishing *bon voyage,* he told himself rather grimly. Then suddenly he saw Mary Drake and she had finally managed to thrust her slim way through the gesticulating groups on shore and was searching the deck of the ship with her eyes.

Rodrigo turned abruptly and hurried down the gangplank. He pushed to her side.

"This is good of you, Mary," he said to her.

She started, turned, smiled, and said seriously, "I came down to ask you to reconsider not coming back."

"How do you know I am not coming back?" he echoed the seriousness in her voice.

"You told me once that you were going away and not return. I guessed you were only waiting until John was firmly on his feet. He is there now. And you are sailing away."

"Would you like me to come back—for yourself, Mary?" he asked hopefully.

"I am not to be considered," she answered almost coldly, though there was a little catch in her throat. "You should come back for the sake of your own soul. To run away and stay away is cowardice. You will spend the rest of your life hating yourself." She lifted her face to his appealingly. "Oh, Rodrigo, can't you see that the only right way is to tell John the truth, even now? He can stand it now. And you will save yourself. You are not happy. You will never be happy as long as this terrible thing is in your heart."

"Is that question of telling John always to stand between us, Mary? Do I have to wreck John's life all over again in order to make you love me?" He asked almost bitterly.

She did not reply. The whistle of the great vessel beside them shrieked mightily amid the hiss of escaping steam.

"Good-bye, Mary," he said brokenly, taking her hand. He hesitated, lifted it to his lips, and, without another glance at her, half ran to the gangplank, which had already been lifted a foot off the dock. So he did not see the tears that streamed down her face, and what was written behind the tears as she lifted her eyes and realized he was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

The weather, for the winter season, was unusually fine during the first five or six days of the voyage eastward, and Rodrigo kept closely to his cabin. He slept much. It seemed to him that for six months he had gone virtually without sleep. The slight motion of the ship, the changed environment soothed him like a lullaby. He rested soundly at night and took frequent naps during the day. By the time the inevitable change in the weather came and stormy seas tossed the staunch vessel about so violently that his cabin had become virtually untenantable, he was fit and ready to endure the gusty blasts and angry, slanting rain. Rodrigo was an excellent sailor and really enjoyed the decks of a wave-tossed ship.

On a cloudy afternoon, with the wind lashing the rigging with screams and whines and the waves shooting spray as high as the canvas-protected bridge, Rodrigo sat wrapped in blankets in a steamer chair and calmly watched the mountainous watery madness on the other side of the rail. So thoroughly was the little man in the steamer chair beside him sheltered in overcoat, cap, and a whole battalion of

blankets that Rodrigo was unaware that another foolish soul, in addition to himself, was on deck. Indeed he looked around bewildered for a moment to discover where the voice was coming from when his neighbor addressed him with a chuckle, " 'What fools these mortals be', eh? Freezing to death up here when we might be down in nice warm cabins?"

Rodrigo laughed, "The cabins may be warm, but most of them are very damp by this time, I guess, and full of *mal de mer* germs."

He observed the habitation of this deep, cheerful voice more closely and saw that it came out of the fat, ruddy, cheerful face of a man about fifty years old, an American. Rodrigo suddenly became aware that he was very glad to hear a friendly voice, that he was in need of human companionship. They continued the conversation and Rodrigo learned that his companion was a Dr. Woodward from Washington, bound for Rome on a holiday. Still talking on inconsequential topics in a light, mind-easing vein, they later walked the abandoned deck together, sloshing through the water that the waves frequently splattered about them. That evening Woodward transferred his place in the dining saloon, now also practically abandoned save for them, to the table where Rodrigo had been eating alone heretofore.

Learning Rodrigo's line of business and having had explained to him how a titled Italian happened to be connected with a Fifth Avenue

art emporium, David Woodward revealed casually, between courses of a rather damp dinner, that he was head of the psychiatric ward at the Luther Mead Hospital, Washington. His charges were for the most part, he explained, shell-shocked veterans of the late war, though they also included a number of civilian patients with mental disorders.

"Perhaps it's my association with mental deficients ashore that leads me to enjoy irrational pursuits, such as getting my feet soaked on a wave-washed deck," Woodward chortled.

During the next few days which continued monotonously stormy, the two became quite well acquainted. Under Rodrigo's questioning, Woodward talked further about his own profession, in which he was deeply immersed and stood very high.

On deck one day he made the remark in a discussion of mental disorders that insanity comes often from too much introspection or the abandonment of the mind to a single obsession. On an impulse, Rodrigo told him of John Dorning's experience, making the case hypothetical and, of course, not mentioning names. Having stated the circumstances, he asked Dr. Woodward whether there was a chance that the victim might suffer a relapse and topple over the border-line or whether he might in time completely efface from his mind the harrowing event that had unbalanced him.

The psychiatrist pondered a moment and then

answered, "I should say that if this man never learns anything definite about his wife's fate, that is, does not receive information that would give him a new shock, he will go on much as he is at present. I gather from what you say that he has made a partial recovery, so that he again finds life tolerable, but that he is in a measure living under the shadow of the initial shock. Well, that is not so bad. Most of us are concealing a major worry or two. On the other hand, this man's salvation probably lies in falling in love with another woman, a different type of woman from his former wife. That would be an almost sure way of healing his wound. And I should say that the chances of this happening are excellent, particularly if the man is being brought into daily contact with a woman of a sympathetic turn of mind. That's when men frequently fall in love, you know—when they have suffered tragedy and are desperately in need of the sort of sympathy only a woman can give."

Rodrigo suddenly abandoned the subject, for in this "woman of a sympathetic turn of mind" he had seen, in a flash, Mary. Would she and John, thrown together now, with John aching for someone to minister to his bruised mind, fall in love? Having, as he tortured himself into believing, lost Elise to John, would he now be called upon to give up Mary to his friend, as if in retribution? He made an excuse, arose abruptly and started to pace the deck. But

this was foolishness, he told himself at length. What if Mary and Dorning should learn to love each other? It was natural. They had much in common. They were both fine, wonderful characters. And had he not virtually abandoned her, lost her by being what she termed a "coward," revealed to her he would never return?

He told himself savagely that he was the most selfish man in the world. And in the next moment he was praying silently that this thing would not happen, that the two people he loved best in the world would not fall in love with each other. His heart ached with a pain that was physical.

Just before they parted at Naples, whence Dr. Woodward was to entrain at once for Rome, the psychiatrist said half-seriously to Rodrigo, "I have been observing you all the way over, young man. It's a habit of my profession. You have something on your mind that is gnawing at it. Take my warning and get rid of it. Get drunk, get married, get anything—but forget it. Remember what I told you. Don't think too much. It's a bad habit."

Rodrigo walked alone along the crowded, dirty streets of the familiar city, which was bathed in a warmth and sunshine far different from the damp and cold that had remained with them the greater part of the voyage over. He secured a room at the Hotel Metropole and, upon awaking and dressing the next morning,

strolled out upon the balcony of his room to hear the cries of his countrymen driving their carts past the hotel, the protesting shrieks of the miniature trolley cars as they crawled up the hilly streets of the city, the automobiles bustling about with reckless young Italian chauffeurs at the wheel, the old smell and the gay colors that he had grown up with.

He paid a visit before lunch to the real estate man who had the palace of the Torrianis in charge and was told by that brisk, sharp-faced individual that his cable had been received and that he was awaiting Rodrigo's word before renting the place again.

So it was that the heir of the Torrianis was bumped out to his palace in a hired automobile a few hours later and had the doubtful pleasure of strolling through the great empty rooms of the dwelling of his ancestors. The place had suffered a little from the American tenants who had occupied it. Some of the precious frescoes had been chipped, and the whole establishment was musty and dirty. Rodrigo prepared to leave the historic pile with a feeling of depression. Its sorry condition, contrasted with the spick-and-span modernity of the surroundings he had become accustomed to in New York, weakened whatever idea he might have had of settling there. Nevertheless, sentiment and his now comparative affluence demanded that he restore the palace to a habitable condition. He was therefore doubly glad, as well as surprised,

to observe standing beside his rented conveyance a familiar, corpulent female form as he came out.

Maria had been talking excitedly to the chauffeur and now came waddling up to meet her former master. A smile covered her wide and usually stolid face. Rodrigo greeted her heartily and learned from the torrent of words that came from her toothless mouth that she was working in a neighboring villa, which, like the palace of the Torrianis, had been rented by Americans. But, she explained, her Americans were leaving. Had Master Rodrigo come home for good? Would he, perhaps, want old Maria again? She had many times, after the departure of Rodrigo's American tenants, tried to get into the place to clean it. But the pig of a real estate man had refused her a key—her, Maria! Rodrigo, upon the spot, hired her as the permanent caretaker of the palace and turned over to her the massive keys to the outer gate and to the main entrance of the building. She beamed at him as he stepped into the ancient automobile. She shouted blessings upon his head until he disappeared over the hill in a cloud of dust.

It seemed his afternoon for renewing old acquaintances, for a little over a mile from Naples he was about to pass a man and a woman plodding along the dusty road when suddenly the woman raised her head from under the heavy cloth-wrapped bundle she was carrying. It

was Rosa Minardi. Rodrigo at once had his car stopped. Rosa, smiling, set down her bundle, and the man with her, who was quite unencumbered and was smoking a long, curved pipe, followed her leisurely to the side of the automobile. Rosa, after the first greeting, introduced the loose-jointed, lazy-looking fellow as her husband.

She looked older, stouter, and considerably less attractive than she had when Rodrigo had last seen her. He wondered if she had really changed or whether it was because that painful scene in which her father had extorted five thousand liras from him seemed now to have taken place years, instead of months, ago, in quite another world. Certainly there seemed nothing particularly alluring about her now, though she was rolling her bright, black eyes at him hopefully and striking attitudes to display the outlines of her too buxom figure as she talked. She was finding the pose difficult, however. There were tired, aging lines under those eyes. And there was the slouching hulk of a man watching her mildly, her husband. Rosa glanced from Rodrigo to this husband, and sighed. The Minardis never had luck. Her worthless father had long since spent his tainted profits from her love affair with Rodrigo. That same worthless father had saddled this equally worthless husband upon her, with the promise that the man was rich, and had then borrowed

what little money his son-in-law possessed and disappeared once more to Rome.

This, Rosa did not, of course, tell Rodrigo. Instead she said soberly, "You are looking pale, my friend, and older. Has life not been so gay in America, eh?

"Oh, it has been gay enough," he replied, and he began to admit to himself that he too must have changed, what with John and Dr. Woodward and now Rosa telling him of it.

"Do you think, then, to remain in Italy?" she asked, and he thought he detected a little gleam in those once inviting eyes.

The question having thus been put to him directly, he made a decision and said, "No. I am going to travel a while. Later—I do not know. But I am, as you have guessed, Rosa, not so gay. Perhaps in Paris or London I shall be gayer."

"You used to be—very gay," she mused, and again smiled at him coquettishly, but heavily, as if trying to say that it was not impossible that those happy times might be revived. But, though he returned her smile, she failed to stimulate him. Indeed he found her more depressing even than the palace of his fathers. Bright-eyed Rosa turned drudge, slave of a dirty, indolent Italian husband! Well, that was life. As he started on again and looked back at her, trudging under her burden along the dusty road, the man walking, hands in his pockets, by her side, Rodrigo knew that, even had she been

twice as pretty as ever, she would not have struck a spark in him. His old weakness for a pretty face had been killed. And the pity of it was that it had been killed just too late.

He visited Paris, Paris striving to display its old pre-war gayety in the sunny days of a perfect spring. He looked up some old acquaintances, English and Italian artists of the Latin Quarter for the most part, and drank wine with them and talked and tried to recapture some of the old carefree spirit in the musty cafés of Montmartre. He attended the theatre, alone and in the company of his friends and browsed among the galleries and shops, making a few purchases and forwarding them to Dorning and Son. For he could not forget that he was still, in name, John's partner. He found himself frequently speculating, almost unconsciously, as to the outcome of business projects he had had under way when he left and had more than one impulse to write or cable about them. Would he, after all, go back? Dorning and Son had become even more of a part of him that he had suspected. And John and Mary—yes, he wanted that adopted world of his back again intensely already, though he had been gone hardly a month.

Yet the prospect of facing John Dorning day after day, facing his dearest friend with a guilty lie in his heart—and the ache of being near Mary and knowing she was lost to him—he could not endure that!

He crossed the Channel in May, reaching London on a wet and foggy night and establishing himself at the Savoy. For the next few days he loitered in his room, sleeping late and eating only when he felt an active hunger, and walking purposelessly about the streets. On the third evening, over a lonesome dinner, he read by chance in the paper of a play that had opened the night before. It was a problem play called "The Drifters" and, according to the reviewer, possessed considerable merit. Rodrigo was surprised and interested to see the name of Sophie Binner in the cast. Far down in the review, he read a paragraph devoted to Sophie's performance. It said that Miss Binner, late of the musical comedy stage, showed distinct promise in her first straight dramatic rôle, that the mannerisms which used to delight revue patrons had quite disappeared, that "the former Christy ingénue has demonstrated that she is a character actress of polished competence and, of course, outstanding beauty."

Rodrigo was viewing "The Drifters" an hour later. He found its opening act rather ponderous and talky, until the entrance of Sophie. In the plain tailored suit and subdued make-up which her rôle called for, she was, he was surprised to discover, more striking in appearance than she had ever been in the tinsel costumes she had worn for Gilbert Christy. Her shiny golden hair, now cropped and confined closely to her head, instead of flying in the breeze as

previously, set off her piquant, innocent-wise face in fascinating effectiveness. Her voice had somewhere lost its rasping overtone and acquired clarity and gentility. She moved surely and with an understanding of her part that was in amazing contrast to the slovenly manner in which she had always filled the meager requirements of the bits she had played in Christy's sketches. Formerly Sophie had been able only to sing, dance, and display her figure; now, Rodrigo admitted, she was a real actress. He became interested in discovering how the metamorphosis had come about. His chance came more quickly than he had bargained on.

Just before the curtain rose for the second act, an usher handed Rodrigo a card as he resumed his chair very near the stage. The card read:

> Rodrigo:
>
> I noticed you in the audience. I would like to talk with you. Come to my dressing-room after the show, if you care to.
>
> SOPHIE.

It was significant of the change in her, he realized, that later she kept him waiting outside her dressing-room, when he knocked, instead of crying carelessly for him to enter. When she appeared at the door at last, she was dressed simply and becomingly, far more modestly than in the old days. She greeted him cordially

enough and accepted his invitation for a bite of supper in a small restaurant just off Piccadilly.

"You are thinner and older," she accused him, when later they were seated cosily in a corner of the smoke-filled and talk-filled room, for the place was a popular rendezvous for after-theatre crowds, though nothing in the way of entertainment was offered except excellent food and a congenial atmosphere.

"You have changed yourself," he retorted. "Tell me how it happened—why you decided to become an actress."

"I think your friend John Dorning had more to do with it than anything," she surprised him by replying.

"John—but how? Do you mean something he said or did the time you—" He stopped in confusion.

"Go on. I don't mind," she laughed. "All that seems very far away now. I don't know whether or not he told you—I imagined he wouldn't—but I came to see you when I was down and out and—well, I got two thousand dollars from Mr. Dorning by a rather shabby trick. But I received a lot more from him than that, though he'll probably never know it. He's a wonderful man. I was in no mood then for being preached at though, but somehow he made me listen and he got over to me, without preaching at all, just where I was headed. He said that no woman had ever found real happiness

in living on other people and that if I was any good and had any real love for the stage I would dig out on my own and try to get somewhere.

"When he handed over the two thousand dollars, he said that if I was wise, I would take it and use it to tide myself over while I tried to build a real career. What's more, he offered to send me more if I needed it and could prove I was honestly making an effort to succeed in my profession. That was real sportsmanship, wasn't it? I thought so. So I chucked the musical comedy business and caught on with a small stock company in Leeds. I studied day and night, I worked like a dog, and well, I'm a little way on the road to somewhere now."

"I'm glad, Sophie," he said honestly. "John's a prince. I know that too." He looked across the table into her grave blue eyes so intently that her eyes widened into questioning. Then she smiled understandingly.

"I know what you are thinking, Rodrigo," she said softly. "You are thinking that this is the first time you have ever been with me alone that you did not want to take me in your arms and kiss me. The first time that we could sit here comfortably as friends, without making love. I have been thinking the same thing. And it's true. I used to be an awful man-hunter. I used to think I wasn't living unless I was mad about some man—one or more. I remember that I could have killed you that

night you left me in New York. But I have learned different. I have your friend, John Dorning, largely to thank for that."

When he left her at her apartment later, he felt that he had gained a friend.

A letter was handed him by the room clerk that night when he called at the desk of the hotel for his key. Rodrigo stared at the rectangle of white. In the corner was the neat, familiar name of Dorning and Son. The envelope bore his name, typewritten, was addressed to the Palace di Torriani, Naples, and contained scribblings on its face in pencil that had forwarded it to Paris and thence to London. Maria, he decided, had been the original recipient and had sent it to the address he had given her in Paris. He thrust the letter into his pocket and summoned the lift to take him to his room. He wanted to read this message in seclusion, for he had a foreboding of its importance. His original quaking thought that something had happened to John, he assured himself, was absurd. In that event, he felt, Mary would have cabled him.

He sank into a chair, lit a cigarette, and applied trembling fingers to the envelope.

> Dear Rodrigo:
>
> I do not know how firmly your mind is set by this time upon remaining in Europe. I do know that something unexpected has developed here that

vitally affects you and John and all of us.

John is sure you will return soon and intends to tell you then. I am not so sure you are coming back, but I emphatically urge you, for your own sake, to do so, at least until you can learn of these developments from John's own lips. Return to Europe later if you like, but—come now.

I cannot tell you more. Perhaps I have told too much already.

Sincerely yours,
MARY DRAKE.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Mary! He had known instinctively, when the letter was handed to him, that it was from Mary. Suddenly its meaning flashed upon him. She and John loved each other, were going to be married, and wanted to tell him about it, wanted him to take charge of the business while they were away on their honeymoon. In vain he told himself that the thought was absurd, that, if such a thing had really happened, Mary would have written him a straightforward letter about it instead of this cryptic note. Ever since he had left New York, this idea—yes, he might as well admit it—this *dread* of Mary and John loving each other had hung over his head. Yet why should he dread it? It was no more than fair. A love for a love. He had

taken Elise from John; now John was taking Mary from him.

He lay awake all that night, fearing, restless, unhappier than he had ever been in his life. The next morning he engaged passage for New York on a steamer leaving within three days.

CHAPTER XIX

Rodrigo nodded his way through the surprised, cheerful greetings of Dorning and Son's staff stationed out in the exhibition rooms and approached the open door of John Dorning's office with an odd mixture of eagerness and reluctance to confirm the fears within him. Almost on the threshold, a voice stopped Rodrigo and he turned to face the smiling visage and outstretched hand of Henry Madison.

"Well, well, this *is* a surprise," Madison chuckled. "John will be delighted to see you." And in answer to the questioning look in Rodrigo's eyes, he added reassuringly in a lowered voice, "John is quite his old self now—thanks to Mary Drake. She's done wonders with him, made a new man out of him. You'll see." He shook hands again and suggested—"I'll drop into your office later if I may and hear about your trip."

"Yes—do," invited Rodrigo in a preoccupied tone.

When he stepped into the doorway of John's office, he heard the precise accents of his friend's voice dictating a letter. The voice was strong, firm. Yes, John must be quite his old

self, as Madison had said. "She's done wonders with him." In the next moment, Rodrigo had walked into the room. The dictation ceased abruptly, a cry of surprised joy burst from John's lips as he rose and rushed toward Rodrigo. He pumped the returned voyager's hand, pounded him upon the back. It was several moments before Rodrigo could turn to Mary, who had also risen and was standing quietly near the exultant John. She was smiling too as he took her hand and pressed it hard. But as Rodrigo turned to John again, she quietly left the room, pausing at the door and looking her gladness at the two reunited friends.

"Yes, I am feeling very well now," John answered Rodrigo's congratulations upon his improved condition. "Thanks to Mary. She's been a wonder. I don't know how I could have gotten along without her. She's worked her head off helping me get back into my stride again. I've had her up to Greenwich with me several week-ends at Dad's house helping me catch up with my correspondence. Alice and she have become great pals, and Dad thinks there's nobody like her."

"There isn't," Rodrigo cut in succinctly.

John regarded him curiously. "Nobody can help loving Mary," he said. "She's one of the best."

Rosner, having learned of Rodrigo's arrival, walked in at that moment and greeted the prodigal with his nervous effusiveness. He, too,

was looking in ruddy health. Everything at Dorning and Son's, indeed, seemed to be progressing excellently without him, Rodrigo thought a trifle wistfully. When the little man had departed, the Italian turned to John and announced, "I must see about getting my baggage through. I'll see you later?"

"By all means," said John. "I'm living at our apartment again, you know. I'll meet you there and we'll go out to dinner. Later we'll go back and have a long talk. I've something important to tell you, old man, something that vitally concerns us both." John's face had turned very sober, and there was a return of the old sombreness about his eyes that had been part of the outward sign of his recent ordeal.

Rodrigo strolled into his own office, intending to greet his secretary and inspect the mail that had arrived in his absence. That worthy and very homely lady was, for the moment, out of the building somewhere, but, opening the center drawer in his desk, he discovered an accumulation of letters neatly stowed away. He sat down, and, spreading the mail upon his desk, started leisurely to slit the envelopes. He looked up and arose as Mary slipped into the room.

"I wanted to see you alone and tell you how glad I am that you have—come back," she said eagerly, a look of gladness in her eyes that caused his pulse to quicken a little.

"I came because of your letter," he declared.

He braced himself and added fairly steadily, "What are the 'developments' you spoke of?"

"Hasn't John told you?"

"No."

"Then he will—a little later. You will find they are worth changing your plans for."

He fingered the paper-cutter nervously. "John looks like a different man than he was when I last saw him," he said. "He seems at peace with the world at last, to have forgotten—his tragedy. I think you are the cause of it, Mary."

She paled a little. "What do you mean?" His tense voice frightened her.

And then he found he could not voice his fears, could not bear to force her to tell him that he had lost her. "Why, he has learned to depend upon you, and you have given him a new outlook on things, cheered him up, made a man of him again. You have been such a—wonderful friend to him."

She looked at him quizzically, alarmed at his peculiar manner. "Everybody is his friend," she said soberly. "Everybody loves John. He is the salt of the earth."

"He is that," Rodrigo agreed, and he watched her go away from him, back to John.

He sank into his chair, debating his problem. There was in Rodrigo a strange intuition about women. His success with them had, apart from his physical attractiveness, consisted in an ability, far greater than that of the usual pred-

atory male, to understand them. He thought now that he understood Mary. In a quiet, conventional way she had fallen in love with John Dorning, he reasoned from his recent observation of them, and John with her. Their love was still in its budding state. Unless it were interfered with, it would grow steadily into a steadfast union. John would ask her to marry him and she would assent. Her love would be mingled with pity, but yet it would be as near pure love as modern marriages usually subsist upon.

"Unless it were interfered with." In this last meeting with Mary, brief as it had been, Rodrigo detected something that would ordinarily have set his heart to exulting. Mary's coming to him, her eagerness to extend her personal greetings alone, her face and manner, her desire to remain longer and her obvious disappointment at his rather curt reception of her, had convinced him of something that, never addicted to false modesty, he did not hide.

"Unless it were interfered with." Well, he took a sad little triumph in assuring himself, he could interfere if he chose, successfully interfere. Just now, when she was here, he could have, if he had yielded to his selfish desire, swept her into his arms and made her his forever. He could have killed that budding love for John within her by appealing to the force of her original love for himself, by rushing her

off her feet with his superior strength and feeling. He was sure of this.

Mary Drake still loved him, was the refrain that kept pounding in his heart. He could have her now if he wanted to take her. If he remained near her, he would not be able to keep his love silent. He would *have* to tell her. Every fibre of his being would revolt against the sacrifice. He would not be strong enough to give her up to John, though John needed her, loved her, depended upon her to keep him out of the dark shadows that had so tragically enveloped him.

No, Rodrigo concluded, he would have to go away—and stay away. Go away at any cost. Go away as soon as he decently could.

Having spent the day in the details of securing his baggage and unpacking it amid the familiar scenes of the Park Avenue apartment, he met John and had dinner with him at their favorite little French restaurant. Afterward, in the softly lighted living-room of the apartment, over their pipes they talked.

"I have been wondering," John said, "why you came back so suddenly, without warning us. I had been expecting a letter or cablegram for weeks. I had begun to worry about you. You left no forwarding address with me. And, of course, I would not have asked you to cut short your vacation anyway. Poor chap, you were tired out, and, to tell you the truth, you don't look particularly chipper now."

"I received a letter from Mary. She spoke of certain 'developments.'" Rodrigo said doggedly, anxious to have it over. "She urged me to return and talk with you."

John asked quietly, "Did she say what those 'developments' were?"

"No."

John smiled, "Wonderful, competent Mary! She insisted I write you to come back. I refused, because I felt you were coming soon anyway. She, strangely enough, was not so sure. So she wrote you herself? Well, perhaps she was wise."

"And the 'developments' she spoke of?" Rodrigo's voice sounded very small.

John tapped the ashes from his pipe, looked at his friend gravely. "Rodrigo," he said, "I have found out the truth about Elise."

Rodrigo started with the unexpectedness of the answer, a chaos of thoughts running suddenly riot within him.

"I know that she is dead," John continued. "And I know that you know she is dead, that you have always known it. But wait, I will begin at the beginning! You will remember that I spoke to you before you left about selling my house in Millbank. Well, I kept putting that off because I dreaded to enter the place. You see, I had left everything exactly the way it was before—she went. While my mental condition was still uncertain, I did not want to disturb things. I felt that the shock

of going there, seeing her room, her clothes, everything that my happiness, my life, had depended upon, would be too much for me. Even after I came back from California feeling so much improved, I kept putting it off. I dreaded the ordeal. But three or four weeks after you left, I pulled myself together, told myself that those foolish fears were nonsense, a sign even that I had gone a little mad. So I went over there, and I spent two whole days in the house, alone. I put my house of memories in order. And, Rodrigo, I found out many terrible things."

Rodrigo, his eyes fixed intensely upon his friend, shuddered.

But John went on calmly. "Well, I had to break into her desk, among other things, and I found there letters, love-letters from other men. Among them were letters from you, showing me, Rodrigo, that she loved you and that you had had the courage to repulse her love. My idol crashed then and there down to the floor, and the whole world went black again. Rodrigo, there in that room alone I came as near going crazy as I hope ever to again in this world. I cursed God for letting me see that He had made life so hideous. I wanted to die. But I came through it. I think that it was those letters of yours—those letters were striking blows for my happiness—that brought me through. That is twice you have saved my life,

Rodrigo—once from Rosner and once—from myself."

Rodrigo rose and cried suddenly, "Don't say that, John! I can't bear it!"

"Please, Rodrigo," John restrained him. "I understand. You have always tried to protect my happiness. You tried to keep me from knowing that I loved a woman who never existed. But she is dead now. After I came out of that house and went back to my father's and told them what I had found, they confessed to me that anonymous notes had come to me soon after Elise's disappearance hinting that I might learn something about her if it were possible to identify the victims of the Van Clair fire. My father and Warren had kept those notes from me. They felt it was time now to tell me about them. And it became clear to me. The woman who died in the Van Clair fire was Elise."

Rodrigo cried out, the secret wrenched from him almost without his volition, "I know she was! And I sent her there that night, John! You'll remember you went to Philadelphia and wired me to take the midnight train and meet you the next morning. Well, she came to me that night in the office, where I was working on the estimates. I was in a reckless mood, disappointed—but no matter, it was no excuse for me. I sent her to the Van Clair, intending to follow. Oh, I didn't go. I got my senses back, thank God! But I was responsible. I thought

I had grown so good, and I knifed my best friend." He lifted his pale, stricken face to John, pleading for mercy, "I've been through an ordeal too, John. The difference between us is that—I deserved it and—the ordeal is going to go right on. Even though I've torn this awful secret out of me at last!"

John Dorning was silent, stunned, trying to realize the significance of his friend's confession.

And again Rodrigo cried out, pleadingly, "I couldn't tell you before, John. I had to let you go on driving yourself crazy from anxiety about her. I thought it would kill you to know. Mary begged me to tell you—but I couldn't." Tears were in his eyes. His strong body was shaken with emotion. Suddenly he flung himself at John's feet and no longer tried to control his weeping.

And finally John spoke, and Rodrigo wonderingly looked up and saw that John had a little smile on his face, that he was laying gentle hands upon the recumbent back. "I knew something was tearing at you," John said, "And I'm glad you told me about—Elise. Knowing her now for what she really was, I can forgive you Rodrigo. None of us are perfect. God knows I have found that out. You were my friend even that night of the Van Clair—in the critical moment you were my friend. And you always will be."

Dorning helped Rodrigo to his feet, made him

smile again, took his hand. Rodrigo clutched it, crying, "John, you are a saint. If you hadn't forgiven me, if you—" He turned his head and went slowly back to his chair.

"I told Mary what I had discovered about Elise," said John. A light of understanding burst upon him with these words. He ventured, "Rodrigo, had you told her already of—the Van Clair?"

Rodrigo nodded affirmatively.

John was thinking rapidly.

"What did Mary say?" he asked.

"She called me a coward for not telling you the truth, sick as you were. She said she could not—respect me, if I didn't."

John said almost to himself, "Mary thought a lot of you, Rodrigo—does yet."

"She loves *you*," Rodrigo answered softly, but he could not quite keep the despair out of his voice.

John glanced at him understandingly at last, but he said nothing. When, after a long silence, they resumed the conversation, Dorning strove to change its subject.

"I wish you'd take it easy for a while at the shop, Rodrigo. You don't look well," he said gently. "Rosner has things quite well in hand. We miss you, but I do want you well and perfectly happy when you come back to work."

"I was thinking of returning to Europe," Rodrigo replied, attempting to make his statement as matter-of-fact as possible.

"Not because of anything you have said here to-night, I hope," John urged at once. "I want you to believe me, old man, that your confession hasn't made any difference. It's rather relieved my mind, to tell the truth. I suspected something was up that I did not yet know about. It's made me love you more than ever, drawn us closer."

"I appreciate that, John. I feel the same way," Rodrigo said.

Nevertheless, he told himself, he was going away. He would see Mary, deliberately kill her love for him, throw her into John's arms. John needed her. John deserved happiness. It was the least he could do for John. But it was not a confession of weakness, his wanting to see Mary again. He *must* see her, must do something that would convince her he was unworthy of her love, that would strangle any desire in her to keep his memory alive after he was gone. He must disappear from her heart as well as from her sight.

CHAPTER XX

Rodrigo walked slowly into the offices of the Italian-American Line late the next morning, like a man lately condemned to the scaffold, and booked passage on a vessel sailing for Naples the following Saturday. Then he took the subway uptown.

The warm sun drenching the exhibition rooms of Dorning and Son, the cheerful good mornings of the clerks, mocked at his mood. He summoned a masking smile on his face and held it while he opened the door of John's office and strode in. Mary was sitting beside John at the latter's desk, their heads quite close together. They had been talking confidentially, almost gayly. Their faces sobered as they looked up at the intruder. It seemed a warning to Rodrigo that he must go through with his program. The faint hope, conceived the night before, that the "developments" Mary had written him about, concerned the discovery of Elise's treachery only and had nothing to do with an announcement of a troth between Mary and John, vanished. It was unmistakable. They loved each other. It showed in the quick, warning glance that passed between them as he

entered, in the way they almost sprang apart at the sight of a third person.

They greeted him warmly enough, and almost immediately John departed on the excuse of a conference with Henry Madison. Rodrigo took the seat that his partner had vacated. He did not have to urge Mary to remain.

His voice simulated a careless nonchalance as he smiled at her and said, "I hadn't a chance hardly to say a word to you yesterday, Mary."

"That wasn't my fault," she pouted. He was surprised to discover that Mary could pout. He thought she had never looked more adorable. Sophie, Rosa, Elise—never in their prime had they been as beautiful as Mary.

"Did you enjoy your vacation?" she asked unexpectedly.

"Very much," he replied, smiling as if in memory. "You know, Mary, there's no use pretending—I've never changed. I found it out when I got abroad. I can't play the hermit. It isn't in me. Over here, with you around, perhaps, I can hold myself in leash. But I am not like you or John, like Americans, at heart. There is something in my blood. I was torn up physically and emotionally when I left, and I had to forget somehow. That isn't an excuse, of course, but it may explain things to you a little. I—I sank into the old rut over there, Mary. The different environment, the different sort of women, the liquor, everything." He

flung out his hands hopelessly, in a continental gesture.

"You saw some of your old friends?" she asked quietly.

"Many of them. And they were unchanged too. It was the same old story. I met a girl in Naples whose father had once blackmailed me for an affair with her—and now I suppose he'll be blackmailing me over again. In London, I ran across Sophie Binner. You remember Sophie? We became quite good friends again. She seems to be my sort. I'm what you called me—a coward." He sighed, and watched her face.

But her face, strangely enough, did not flinch. She asked him in the same quiet voice, "You are trying to tell me that you are the same man you were that first day here, when you tried to play sheik with me, flirted with me?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I shouldn't think you would have come back here—after playing fast and loose all over Europe, after betraying the trust John and I put in you."

"I came in response to your letter," he said with some dignity.

"Nevertheless, you shouldn't have come in that case. You should have stayed with your—friends."

"I know. You are right," he said. "And I am going back to—them. I booked my passage

this morning. I am sailing in a week for Italy, and this time I am not coming back."

She started. Her face lost its imperturbability. She said, "And that is all you have to say to me?"

He leaned toward her, his throat filling with a storm of words. But then he fell back, lowering his head. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "That is all—that and—please think as well as you can of me, Mary. And go on—loving John and taking care of him."

Her lips were twitching a little now. "Do you want to know what I really think of you?" she asked suddenly.

He raised his tired eyes, his eyes that were saying what his lips were sealed against, and he nodded his head.

She suddenly left her chair and came to him, laid her hands upon his shoulders, and said clearly and proudly, "I think that you are a terrible fibber. I think you have a crazy notion that John and I are in love. And I *know* this—I love you, Rodrigo, and you are never going to leave me again."

And then he reached out and clutched her fiercely, devouringly into his arms, kissed her again and again, crying her name pitifully like a baby. And when at last he, still holding her tightly, raised her face so that he could look at it and prove he was not dreaming, he saw that she too was weeping.

He cried, "Mary! Mary! Oh, my dear,"

again and again. And again and again he kissed her.

Finally he let her go to adjust her disheveled hair and clothes into some semblance of order. She smiled at him and asked, "How could you think I could love anybody but you—coward or no coward? Oh, I found out while you were gone how foolish I was ever to risk losing you. I lay awake reviling myself that I had sent you away—yes, I *did* send you. And I had to have you back—or dash over to Europe and search for you."

"But John?" he asked. "I thought John and you——"

"I love John too, but as a brother. I always have. And he has felt the same towards me. But you—oh, my poor, poor boy!" He seized her greedily again, and his lips were upon hers as a knock sounded upon the door. He released her, looked at her so guiltily that she laughed aloud.

"It is only John," she said happily. "He knows—about us. He confirmed my suspicions that you were torturing yourself with this silly idea that he and I were in love. He even foretold that you would pretend to be the bold, bad man of old. John is wise, you see, wiser even than you. But not half so——"

And then John walked in and read their faces at a glance.

CHAPTER XXI

But, after all, Rodrigo sailed for Italy the next Saturday. Though he had changed his booking from a single to a double cabin and the passenger list read: The Count and Countess Rodrigo di Torriani.

John Dorning, looking almost as radiant as the bride and groom, saw them off at the pier. For a long time they stood chatting on the deck of the great vessel together, these three young people amid the throng of waving, shouting tourists. When the warning blasts sounded from the smokestack whistle, John whispered banteringly to Rodrigo, "This time you will not call upon any of your ex-lady friends, eh? Rosa or Sophie—you bet I was glad to get that good news of Sophie. Well, cable me when you land. And please come back on schedule. You are leaving Dorning and Son terribly handicapped, you know—my two best partners away at once." He kissed Mary and pressed Rodrigo's hand, and hurried down the gangplank. He stood there, a thin, but sturdy figure, waving to them while the great ship backed out into the channel and pointed her bow toward the east.

"John Dorning is the finest of all the men that ever lived," Rodrigo said solemnly.

"Almost," Mary replied.

Gliding through the magic moonlight over a mirror-like sea, they sat very close to each other that evening in deck-chairs, and she said to him, at the end of a long conversation, "And that is why I love you most, Rodrigo—because you have conquered yourself."

"And so has good old John," he replied.

"Yes, so has John. And both you—and I—have found joy because of that. It's the only way to win real happiness."

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